

Study links positive fitness center climate to better health

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(Medical Xpress)—Sticking to an exercise routine is not easy, especially when the gym is not exactly a person's favorite place to be. Two University of Kansas researchers have published a study showing that, when exercisers perceived the climate at a fitness center as positive, caring and task-involving, and found the staff to be positive and supportive, those subjects were both more likely to commit to exercise and have higher life satisfaction in general.

Theresa Brown, director of student affairs research, and Mary Fry, associate professor of health, sport and [exercise](#) science, surveyed nearly 5,000 people who exercise at a chain [fitness](#) center with locations in all 50 states. They sought to gauge the connection between members' perceptions of staff behaviors, motivational climate, their own behaviors, commitment to future exercise and life satisfaction.

"That's long been an interest of mine, how to get people to commit to exercise," Brown said. "I think [fitness centers](#) can be a great place for people to exercise. Unfortunately, a lot of centers aren't very welcoming. I think fitness professionals aren't always aware of the powerful key they hold. They can really help people embrace fitness."

Survey respondents took part in a structured group exercise class in a dance-style format. Instructors are required to become certified through training and maintain certification through regular feedback sessions. The respondents answered questions about how staff interacted with exercisers, whether they felt they were courteous, learned their names,

made them feel welcome and provided positive motivation. They also reported on how they perceived the climate at the centers and how satisfied they were with their lives. The study is published in the journal *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*.

Respondents overwhelmingly gave the staff high scores in providing positive motivation and focusing on each member attaining their own goals, instead of focusing attention on the most fit or most athletic in the groups. Those who perceived the environment as positive reported intentions to continue their fitness program, and they also tended to interact with their fellow participants more.

"They're creating opportunity for interaction," Brown said of the positive environment. "It becomes more fun, which makes exercising more comfortable for everyone."

Fry's previous research has examined caring, task-centered climates and how they can play a role in making sports more enjoyable and lead to better outcomes for those who take part. There was not much research available on how caring versus ego-driven climates could affect individuals to commit to exercise routines in fitness centers, however.

"We were looking at the question of 'how do you get people to perceive that positive climate in fitness centers?,' and the staff play a huge role in that," Fry said.

Respondents who reported a positive environment and staff who went out of their way to be helpful didn't just feel that way themselves.

"The more they perceived the environment as positive, the more they felt others perceived it the same way," Fry added.

Perhaps most intriguing among the findings was that those who reported

a positive workout environment and helpful staff also reported high levels of [life satisfaction](#). That finding is significant, Brown and Fry said, because satisfaction in life can carry over from the gym to work, family and other areas of an individual's day-to-day experience. When commitment to an exercise program can be difficult to maintain, helping people do so in a way that goes beyond simply sticking to a routine and keeping customers coming through a center's doors has potential for a profound positive effect.

The findings show that fitness center staff professionals can potentially have a significant positive effect in people's lives and that psychological skills and impressions they create can be just as important as the physical skills they teach, the authors said. For those looking to commit to fitness, it shows that there are good centers available that can make a person feel welcome and that it is OK to be an informed consumer and expect positive interactions.

"Any barrier you can remove between individuals and fitness is beneficial," Brown said. "And a big one of those is, 'I'm intimidated.'"

Provided by University of Kansas

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