

Rethinking exercise: Replace punishing workouts with movement that makes you happy

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Many women start fitness programs to lose weight, and when they don't, they feel like failures and stop exercising.

And then, months or a year later, they do the same thing again—creating a vicious cycle that fails to consider what might be leading to short-term motivation, says Michelle Segar, director of the University of Michigan's Sport, Health, and Activity Research and Policy Center.

In a new study funded internally by the National Cancer Institute, Segar and co-investigators analyzed what [women](#) say makes them feel happy and successful, and how their expectations and beliefs about exercise foster or undermine those things.

"A new understanding of what really motivates women might make an enormous difference in their ability to successfully incorporate physical activity into their daily routine—and have fun doing it," said Segar, who is also a researcher at the U-M Institute for Research on Women and Gender.

The findings, which will appear in the journal *BMC Public Health*, show that both active and inactive women report the same ingredients for feeling happy and successful:

Connecting with and helping others be happy and successful.

Being relaxed and free of pressures during their [leisure time](#). Accomplishing goals of many sorts (from grocery shopping to career goals).

But the study also found that for inactive women, their beliefs and expectations about exercise actually thwarted the things that make them feel happy and successful:

They believe "valid" exercise must be intense, yet they want to feel relaxed during their leisure time.

They feel pressured to exercise for health or to lose weight, yet during their leisure time they want to be free of pressures. Success comes from achieving goals, yet their expectations about how much, where and how they should be exercising means they can't achieve these goals.

"The direct conflict between what these low-active women believe they should be doing when they exercise, and their desire to decompress and renew themselves during leisure time, demotivates them," Segar said.

"Their beliefs about what exercise should consist of and their past negative experiences about what it feels like actually prevents them from successfully adopting and sustaining physically active lives."

Segar and co-investigators Jennifer Taber, Heather Patrick, Chan Thai and April Oh conducted eight focus groups among white, black and Hispanic women aged 22-49 who were either categorized as "high active" or "low active."

While the findings about happiness and success seemed to hold true for both groups in the different demographics, low-active women held distinctly different views than high-active women about exercising.

"We've all been socialized to exercise and be physically active for the

last 30 years," said Segar. "The traditional recommendation we've learned to believe is that we should exercise at a high intensity for at least 30 minutes, for the purpose of losing weight or improving our health. Even though there are newer recommendations that permit lower intensity activity in shorter durations most people don't know or even believe it."

This more traditional message has worked for a small minority of the population, but more generally it has failed to increase population physical activity, she says.

"This traditional approach to exercising might actually harm exercise motivation. Our study shows that this exercise message conflicts with and undermines the very experiences and goals most women have for themselves," she said.

The exceptions found in the study were among the more active participants, who held more flexible views of exercise. They expressed that it "was not the end of the world" if they had to skip exercising once in awhile. They made exercise more of a "middle priority," which took the pressure off and left room for compromise when schedules and responsibilities did not permit planned exercise to occur.

The high-active women seemed to have more positive feelings from exercising, in contrast to most of the low-active women, who, in general, tended to dread the very idea of it.

"There are important implications from this study on how we can help women better prioritize exercise in their day-to-day life," Segar said.

"We need to re-educate women they can move in ways that will renew instead of exhaust them, and more effectively get the message across that any movement is better than nothing. To increase motivation to be physically active, we need to help women to want to [exercise](#) instead of

feeling like they should do it."

This can be achieved by:

- Re-educating women that movement can and should feel good to do.
- Promoting physical activity as a way to connect with important others.
- Reframing physical activity as a vehicle that helps women renew and re-energize themselves to better succeed at their daily roles and goals.
- Explain [physical activity](#) as a broad continuum that counts all movement as valid and worth doing.

Provided by University of Michigan

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