Motivating Women to Move, By Breaking Down Barriers

By Ruth Kava — June 3, 2016

For years we’ve been advised to get up and move — to improve/maintain health. And while exercise isn’t the best way to lose weight, it definitely helps maintain weight loss. Yet many of us remain essentially sedentary — in 2014 nearly 24 percent of Americans reported engaging in no leisure time physical activity.

How do we motivate the couch potatoes among us to take on a new persona? In particular, how do we get women more active, since they seem to fall behind men on the action scale? Well, one important way is to understand what holds people back from greater physical activity, and that’s what a couple of researchers from Dartmouth College investigated, in addition to examining how best to elicit from study subjects their reasons for inactivity.

Drs. A.M. Adachi-Mejia and K.E. Schifferdecker noted that not only are women less active than men, but heavier women (with a greater BMI) have more obstacles to becoming active. They thus set out to learn what barriers women in particular, cite as reasons for inactivity.

Seventy-eight women (average age about 53) were grouped according to BMI class:

- normal — 18.5-24.99
- pre-obese — 25-29.99
- obese class I — 30-34.99
- obese class II — 35-39.99
- obese class III — 40 or more

These participants were assessed by two surveys — one was a structured survey with 15 questions, the second was an open-ended survey. For example, in the first type, a question might...
be, "How often does X prevent you from being physically active?" In the second type, a question designed to elicit such information might be, "What makes it hard for you to be physically active?" and the subject could give up to three reasons.

In the first type of survey, the respondents most frequently cited barriers to increasing activity were lack of time, lack of energy, lack of company and lack of facilities. But the barriers cited differed by weight class, with normal-weight women citing lack of facilities, while the obese women — all three classes — most frequently cited barrier was a lack of self-discipline.

When the researchers analyzed the results of the open-ended survey, they found that respondents tended to focus on different barriers. For example, as weight class increased, more physical barriers were cited, with knee issues being most frequent. The obese classes also were more likely to cite psychological barriers such as depression, procrastination, and lack of motivation, as well as asthma and weight. All weight classes cited being alone or "no one to exercise with" as barriers to physical activity.

The researchers noted that the differences between the results of the two types of surveys could lead to different advice.

"Whereas the results of the closed-ended survey approach revealed barriers that might lead one to counsel women on overcoming psychological barriers and talking about general health," they said, "in contrast, based on the results from the open-ended survey approach in our study, one might instead be inclined to encourage women with physical challenges to work with experts in physical rehabilitation or occupational therapy to help troubleshoot the immediate challenges in being active and eventually work towards greater ability to be active."

Thus, motivating people — especially overweight and obese people — to increase activity can not be accomplished with a one-size-fits-all approach. One must take into account the types of barriers an individual finds important and attempt to help overcome that issue.

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