

Why do obese individuals choose to be active?

Individuals with a body mass index (BMI) over 30 are labelled obese and urged to lose weight. This often includes encouraging physical activity, but most individuals who lose weight regain the weight they lost. Without weight loss, however, there are benefits of physical activity for people labeled obese. Little is known about the reasons why some individuals labelled as obese engage in physical activity and what their experiences are like in physical activity venues. It is important to understand more about physical activity in obesity. Physical activity is beneficial for persons of all sizes, but individuals labelled as obese are known to experience high levels of stigma, which might be a barrier to physical activity.

This study is a sub-analysis of a larger study. The larger study explored how individuals who are currently considered obese or who had been considered obese in the past felt about their health. The study explored participants' experiences over the course of one year and across weight changes. Participants were sought with diverse views on health, including those trying to lose weight, those trying to be healthy without losing weight, and those who did not focus on health and diet in healthy living. In total, 15 individuals participated. All 15 participants were interviewed once about how they felt about their health, size, quality-of-life, health priorities, and any actions they took to help promote these priorities. Out of these 15 participants, 5 participants were then interviewed 3 more times. The researcher also accompanied these 5 participants to sites that they considered important to them with respect to weight and health. The researcher took part in activities at these sites with participants. These sites included physical activity venues, family homes, grocery stores, and various eateries. The researcher then looked for themes that were frequently mentioned across and between interviews and the notes taken during participant-observation. For this particular sub-study, the analysis focused on participants' experiences with physical activity.

The results of the study suggest that participants were quite active. Participants described experiencing stigma in and out of physical activity venues. Participants were very focused on trying to maintain health and mobility in the future. Some participants were worried about gaining weight. This was especially true of participants who were trying to maintain weight losses. Some participants felt pressured from internal feelings or outside forces to be physically active and to track their progress in weight and fitness. For some participants, this pressure had led to disordered eating in the past. Often, these participants adopted a Health-at-Every-Size approach and chose to focus less on trying to lose weight and more on enjoying physical activity and eating intuitively. Some participants felt that feelings of pressure negatively affected their health and goals. Lastly, participants experienced pleasure and a sense of achievement in physical activity. While disappointment in weight loss could lead to less activity; fitness achievements, regardless of weight loss, could lead to sustained engagement and feelings of acceptance. This suggests a greater focus on pleasure and less of a focus on weight loss in promoting physical activity may be beneficial.

Like all studies, this study had limitations. The study focused on gathering in-depth information from participants' point-of-view, rather than gather a wide breadth of information. This means that results cannot be generalized to other populations, but the findings can be tested in other locations to see if they are relevant outside of this small sample. The sample was mostly White women in middle-age. Similar studies should be undertaken in more diverse samples and in other kinds of populations.

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Publication

[Obese persons' physical activity experiences and motivations across weight changes: a qualitative exploratory study.](#)

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