

Body acceptance tied to healthy eating

By Megan Rauscher

Women who accept their bodies, flaws and all, are more likely to eat healthily or intuitively, new research shows. This suggests that women's typical reasons for dieting -- dissatisfaction with their bodies -- may backfire.

"There is a lot of negative body talk among women; women think that they can best lose weight and feel better if they are first dissatisfied with their bodies," Dr. Tracy Tylka told Reuters Health. "Rather, this research shows that adopting a positive body image is more likely to be associated with intuitive eating."

Intuitive eaters don't diet -- they recognize and respond to internal hunger and fullness cues to regulate what and how much they eat, Tylka explained. Intuitive eating has three components: "unconditional permission to eat when hungry and whatever food is desired; eating for physical rather than emotional reasons; and reliance on internal hunger/fullness cues."

Tylka, an assistant professor of psychology at Ohio State University's Marion campus has conducted several studies on the concept of intuitive eating. In one study published in April involving 199 college-aged women, Tylka found that women who followed intuitive eating principles had a slightly lower body weight than women who did not.

"Intuitive eating was negatively associated with body mass, such that people who ate intuitively weighed less than people who dieted," she said.

In her latest studies presented this month at the American Psychological Association meeting, Tylka and her colleagues examined who was most likely to follow intuitive eating principles.

They found, among nearly 600 college women, that those with higher levels of appreciation and acceptance for their body were more likely to be intuitive eaters.

Intuitive eaters spend less time thinking about how their body appears to others and more time considering how their body feels and functions, Tylka observed. They "perceive the body as an agent of action rather than an object of attraction...focusing on how the body functions rather than its appearance," Tylka told Reuters Health.

Intuitive eating, Tylka's found, is "positively associated with psychological well-being, such as self-esteem, positive emotions, adaptive coping, self-acceptance, optimism, and resilience in the face of stress."

Intuitive eaters also reported receiving more positive messages from parents and others regarding their bodies.