

# Social Support and Body Image in Group Exercise Programs for Older Adult Women



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**Research Aim :** To understand what behaviours support positive body image and help to cope with negative body image in the context of group physical activity for older adult women.

**The Study :** 60-90 minute qualitative interviews were conducted at a single site with 14 women (aged 65 and older) who participated in group exercise classes

## Takeaways :

- Body image is complicated but exercising generally has positive effects
- Women were inspired by others who were continuing to exercise and coping with functional limitations
- Body acceptance was communicated through active and passive communication
- Having a variety of body types and abilities helped to make women feel accepted and welcome
- Skilled and empathetic instructors helped to promote positive body image

## Positive Body Image is...

The acceptance, appreciation, respect, and favourable opinions of one's body in relation to appearance and function, including its unique characteristics, functionality and capability (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010)

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## Results

### Theme 1: Body Image is Complicated but Exercising has Positive Effects

- Appreciation of how the body functions can improve body image. However, placing high value on function rather than appearance is not a fail-safe way to promote positive body image, as function also tends to decline during aging.

#### In the current study:

- Physical activity helped women to be accepting of their body. However for some, physical activity elicited strong negative emotions.
- Overall, physical activity tended to enhance feelings of control over body function, health, and appearance.

*"I step out of that class, you feel like a million dollars right? That's why people come. You get addicted to it, you get a high from it, you know? I actually have a lot of muscle pain in my body. Yesterday I was in, my hands hurt, my muscles hurt in my arms, and that's why I come here as well because the more I come here the more it helps."*

### Theme 2: Fitting in and Being Inspired by Others

- A component of positive body image is being able to filter out negative body related information and give more attention to positive body related information

#### In the current study:

- When women compared themselves to those who had more limited function, it made them feel good about the function that they had.
- Others who were coping effectively with functional or health issues but continuing to exercise served as role models and helped women to recognize their own ability.
- Having a range of abilities and body types in the classes helped the women to feel positively about their own bodies because they felt a general sense of acceptance.

### Theme 3: What is not Discussed

- Body acceptance can be communicated by active communication or by not focusing or commenting on the body.
- People often prefer to seek support from those similar to them.

#### In the current study:

- When participants and instructors talked about how to alleviate functional issues, it helped to communicate body acceptance by others.
- The women did not talk about appearance with one another. This may have helped to communicate acceptance of, or low importance of appearance.
- The women in the current study were somewhat hesitant to share about functional issues, but it was easier to share with those who had similar issues.

*“I never hear them say ‘oh gosh I wish my hips were smaller’... No, it’s more to do with the physical parts of the body that may or may not be working”*

### Theme 4: Comfort, Understanding, and Acceptance

#### In the current study:

- Women felt welcome and accepted when there was a diverse set of physical abilities in the group, or when humor was used to minimize functional problems. This acceptance helped the women to reframe self-defeating self-talk about their bodies.
- Having encouragement from other participants and the instructor helped to create a sense of confidence.
- In order for encouragement to be effective participants had to feel that they had the freedom to choose their own intensity with an emphasis on being the expert in knowing what’s best for your own body.

*“If people are included or welcome, encouraged to come... they can reflect on stories that they’re telling themselves about I’m no good at this, I can’t do it, or I’m too old, or my balance isn’t good enough”*

### Theme 5: Skilled and Empathetic Instructors Promote Positive Body Image

Skilled instructors helped participants to:

#### 1. Feel secure to explore physical challenges:

Reminding participants they could limit activities when necessary. This helped participants to push themselves and feel safe to explore their body’s abilities.

#### 2. Celebrating successes:

Providing encouragement that helped the women to feel confident in their body’s abilities.

#### 3. Assisting in tune-ups and adjustments:

Giving various options or levels of an activity helped women to continue participating in exercise.

Individualized adjustments and cues to help participants bring awareness to their own body control, movement, and sensations promoted feelings of confidence and ability.

*“The other instructors are good, but they are often pushing you to a limit that I’m thinking, I’ve got a sore back or, whatever, hip that always bugs me and this is really straining. They’re not giving the modifications that this proactive instructor will give”*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Avoid Performance-based Outcomes

- Pay attention to how you communicate what constitutes achievement. Use verbal cues related to how exercise makes the body feel to help participants focus on the physical sensations of the body and to feel connected and responsive to the body’s needs.
- Create programs that focus on self-driven activities to support inclusion of a variety of body types and abilities.

### 2. Provide modifications

- Provide options so that when women face physical limitations they can still participate and feel capable

### 3. Remind participants that they are the experts of knowing what’s best for their body

- Remind participants that they know their body best. This may help participants to feel more comfortable in classes knowing that self-monitoring their intensity is welcomed and not judged or frowned upon.

### 4. Create dialogue about function and minimize appearance-focused comments

- Avoid appearance related comments
- Provide personalized feedback
- Invite participants to share their functional limitations privately with the instructor, to help the instructor to customise the workouts for each participant