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Reverse Freshman Fifteen: A Qualitative Study

Ruth L. Markham

Cedarville University, rlmarkham@cedarville.edu

Taryn Viers

Cedarville University, tviers@cedarville.edu

Ashley Laird

Cedarville University, ashleylaird@cedarville.edu

Ashley Dibert

Cedarville University, adibert@cedarville.edu

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Literature Review

- A qualitative study conducted by Hindle and Carpenter in 2011 focusing on weight maintenance found that participants who held a more relaxed approach to weight management and who set for themselves realistic long-term goals were better able to manage their weight long-term.
- A study of college students in 2014 showed that students reported being influenced by their physical environment. In other words, they were more motivated to work out because they had access and the availability to go to a gym (Deliens, Clarys, Deforche).
- In 2010, Rebecca Krukowski, Jean Harvey-Berino, and Delia Smith wrote an article explaining how the food in a home creates a certain environment and how it affects on weight management. If children grow up in a home where health is important, they have a better understanding for how to live a healthy lifestyle and are more aware of the health decisions they make.

Research Focus

- Our study was intended to gain an understanding of the motivations of college women to change their health behaviors.
- Our goal was to see how factors including availability of resources, family health, peer influence, and social media have affected the process of change and aided in maintaining a healthier lifestyle.

Participants

- To obtain participants for our study, a campus-wide email was sent to all female students in their second year or above.
- We interviewed 15 female students from Cedarville University. After giving consent to the study, all participants were involved in a semi-structured interview done by one of three researchers on our team. Participants were informed that they could drop out of the study if they felt uncomfortable.
- All names and information were kept anonymous through the entire study.

Method

- Participants were interviewed by a member of our research team. Interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes each. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researchers.
- After review of previous research on topics related to health behaviors in college, our questions were designed to reflect similar constructs.
- Questions in the interview revolved around topics which included participants' health in high school, identity, family health awareness, influences of friends, resources, priorities, finances, and faith.
- Data was analyzed using methods of qualitative analysis. Researchers coded the data obtained from the interviews in order to find common themes found among participants.
- Internal validity was enhanced through data audit and member checking.
- Recorded data was erased after the completion of data analysis.

Results

After analyzing the data from the interviews, we found three themes which stood out as common among our participants.

1. An Active Lifestyle in High School

- Of the 15 participants in our study, 13 of them said they played sports in high school.
 - While they were active in sports in their younger years, they were not highly motivated to develop healthy habits and behaviors.
 - Being active in sports did not contribute to the participants developing healthy eating habits during this time in life.
 - After a change in environment (coming to college) and a change in routine, many of them experienced a decrease in physical activity.

“I ate whatever I wanted. It was really bad, really bad. I ate a lot. So much. I pretty much just played sports and practiced.”

“I just only did things during that (sports) season. So I was active for like a third of the year.”

2. Availability of Resources

- Participants experienced a change in availability of food and resources when coming to college.

“When I moved to school, it was actually something that helped me because here I have more freedom to make my own decisions and more options, like in the cafeteria. I have a choice of what I'm eating every day.”

- They reported that the dining hall on campus at Cedarville, as well as the gym, had an influence on them developing new habits at school.
- 13 of the 15 participants specifically mentioned the dining hall as a positive tool to promote healthier eating habits.
- 11 out of the 15 mentioned the gym as a helpful tool.

“The gym has been the biggest help. That, and the healthy choices in Chucks (dining hall). It's funny 'cause there really are healthy choices. The gym that's free to use for students is really nice, and they have so many options there.. I mean, everything.”

- Overall, participants were more focused on changing health behaviors related to eating than they were on exercising.

3. Family Health

- Most participants reported their family's overall health awareness as average. The families seemed to have some awareness of health issues, eating habits, etc. but did not always act on their understanding.
- Many participants told us of members of their families who had health issues, including problems with weight management, allergies, and heart attacks.
 - Several participants expressed a fear of being overweight in the future like older family members. They had specific people in mind whose lifestyle choices they do not want to follow.

Results (cont.)

“One of my great aunts was very big and she died in her 60s I think. She had diabetic neuropathy... I just remember seeing that and going ‘I don't want to look like that some day’.”

- Most of them that told us of a healthy lifestyle change in their family reported that the changes started after the participant made changes.
- They now say that they are healthier than their families overall.

“My parents saw the effect it had on me so they actually started getting into more exercise and adapting their eating habits and stuff.”

Conclusions

- A vast majority of our participants played a sport and were physically active. Their knowledge of how it felt to be active contributed to their desire to make a healthy change.
- Our participants felt the available resources on campus, such as the dining hall and gym, were useful tools. The convenience of these resources was a motivating factor for these women.
- Through questioning, it was clear that most participants viewed the health awareness of their family as average, and several expressed the fear of becoming like family members, in reference, to negative health habits.

Limitations & Future Studies

Limitations:

- We had a limited sample consisting of a small group of participants who were all female college students.
- Researchers led participants through the questions and had to sometimes push for answers/more information from them, instead of participants openly talking about their lifestyle changes.

Future Studies:

- To obtain a broader sample with greater validity, more participants would be used in future studies, using both males and females with a range of ages and races.
- A more in-depth study could be done with participants who intentionally lost a substantial amount of weight through lifestyle changes.