

One Size Doesn't Fit All



Patricia Crawford presented data from UC Berkeley community-based intervention programs at "Confronting Obesity: Science, Health, & Society," a conference held this past April at the Berkeley City Club. The meeting was cosponsored by the UC Berkeley Center for Health Research, the UC Berkeley Center for Weight and Health, and the Kaiser Permanente Institute for Health Policy.

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Another CANFit initiative was the development of an African American-specific curriculum for the 100 Black Men of America, a national mentoring organization with many chapters across the United States. The curriculum incorporates nutrition and fitness into the organization's existing mentorship program. The curriculum has also been adapted for use with a variety of after-school programs and will soon be printed by the USDA Food and Nutrition Services.

"By working with community-based organizations, staff are trained, youth and parents are trained, and that expertise stays in that community," says Hinkle. "You start to build a social norm around eating well and being active, and you start to build a constituency for the issue that's local and community-driven instead of imposed from the outside. That's why we have chosen to work this way." 🌀

Although the nationwide trend toward weight gain has raised much concern about public health, not all health professionals are convinced that health promotion efforts should focus on reducing body mass. A growing number believe that programs should focus on improving health without regard to a person's size. Proponents of this approach, called "size acceptance," point out that long term weight loss is, for most people, nearly impossible to maintain, while improved health is an achievable goal.

"Size acceptance means saying that a person is okay at the size she or he is right now, and that one does not have to lose weight in order to be healthy or to become healthier," says [Joanne Ikeda, M.A., R.D.](#), a Cooperative Extension nutrition education specialist and codirector of the Center for Weight and Health at UC Berkeley. She and others assert that becoming healthy means improving aerobic capacity and metabolic fitness — not attaining a predetermined weight.

Ikeda, together with other health professionals, crafted a document called "Tenets of Size Acceptance," which affirms the diversity of human body size and shape, the importance of self-esteem and positive body image, and the benefits of healthy lifestyles for people of all sizes and shapes. Size acceptance advocates note that the pressure to conform to unattainable ideals sets people up to feel discouraged and have low self-esteem—and when people feel bad about themselves, they are less likely to engage in healthy behavior.

"Our current challenge is to develop programs that celebrate the benefits of a healthy way of life: programs that promote body satisfaction and the achievement of realistic and attainable health goals without concern for weight change," says Ikeda.

One alumna who has taken on this challenge is [Chaya Gordon, M.P.H. '00](#), who started an aerobic dance class for large women called AbunDANCE. She estimates that hundreds of women participated over the five years she led the class.

"Large people in this culture experience discrimination in many ways," says Gordon, "and most women in this culture, regardless of their size, have terrible body image, because we get the message every day that no woman can ever be satisfied with her body."

Gordon, who studied community health education, found that much of what she learned at the School of Public Health was directly relevant to her work in the area of physical activity for large women, as well as her work as research manager at the American Society on Aging, where she promotes physical activity for older adults and elders of color.

"There are connections between barriers to participation in physical activity for large women and other groups of people, such as older adults," says Gordon.

Many women responded to her flier advertising AbunDANCE, and she had long talks with them over the phone. Her greatest challenge, she says, was getting them to actually come to the class. "A lot of them could not overcome the various barriers to get themselves there, but many did." The sense of community created in the class allowed the women to network with one another, talk about issues that concerned them, and become empowered in other aspects of their lives.

"Part of the problem is that most large women have never had the opportunity to connect with the joy of movement in their life," says Gordon. The supportive environment of AbunDANCE helped the participants realize that they were entitled to experience that joy. The class involved a thorough, head-to-toe workout that worked every major muscle group. Gordon encouraged each woman to work at her own pace, enjoy the music, and have fun.

"The wonderful thing I found in my classes was that the more women moved, the more they *could* move," says Gordon. "And they loved it." 🌀

— [Michael S. Broder](#)