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## Adding Therapy to Health Classes Can Improve Teens' Overall Life

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High School, Students, Teens

The teenage years are arguably one of the hardest years that people go through. Since teenagers are often introduced to drugs and alcohol during this stage of life, preventing them from developing bad life behaviors is extremely important. Aside from these drugs, teenagers are also vulnerable to diseases such as obesity and depression. In a new study, researchers found that a new health class program that includes therapy could be an effective way for teenagers to lose weight and avoid drinking.

"These are very exciting findings," says Patricia Conrod, associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Montreal, who was not connected with the study, "It's one of first studies to demonstrate that psychological interventions that were originally designed to improve mental health [may] have beneficial effects on other health indicators."

For this study, the research team headed by Bernadette Melnyk, who is the dean of the nursing school and chief wellness officer at Ohio State University tested a new health class program. Melnyk created a program called COPE, which stands

for **Creating Opportunities for Personal Empowerment**. This program is based from cognitive behavioral therapy and focuses on teaching teenagers how to think about the relationship between thoughts, emotions and actions. The teenagers also learn how to identify "activating events," which are things that might trigger certain emotions.

The research team enlisted the help of nearly 800 high school students from 11 schools throughout the southwest. The students were between the ages of 14 and 16. They were either placed in the traditional health class or in the modified health class with COPE that lasted 15 weeks. The traditional health class taught the students about road safety and infectious diseases. In the other class, the students went through 15 to 20 minutes of exercise. They also learned how to use cognitive strategies to reduce their own stress and anxiety.

The students in the modified class moved an average of 4,000 steps more than the students in the other group. These students were also one third less likely to gain weight. The researchers also calculated obesity and overweight rates. They found that 2.7 percent of the students in the modified class could be classified as overweight or obese whereas nine percent of the students in the traditional class were overweight or obese.

Aside from weight, the researchers found that there was a reduction of 35 percent in drinking by the students in the modified class. These students were also more likely to return to the normal mood range if they were depressed at the beginning of the study. Melnyk believes that the modified class works well because of the strong therapy sessions. Since the research does not separate therapy from exercise, the effects of the class could be due to one of the two factors or a combination of the both of them.

"It's possible that getting moving kick starts the physiological reactions that improve mood and then allow the other changes," Conrod said according to **TIME**. "[But it's] equally possible that better cognitive and mental health allows them to make changes in their life."

The study was published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.