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Women With This Many Tattoos Have Highest Self-Esteem

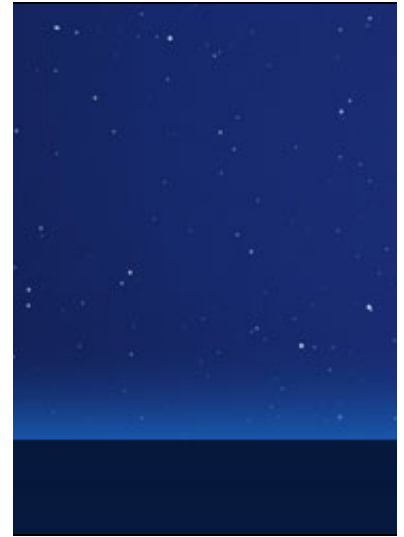
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Tattoos may be more than just body art — new research has found they may be an indicator of high self-esteem. (Stocksy)

Researchers from Texas Tech University surveyed nearly 2,400 college-age people at six American universities and discovered that women who have four or more tattoos report having the highest levels of self-esteem as compared to those who have fewer than four tattoos or none at all.

However, those same women were also four times more likely to say they had attempted suicide in the past. The



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results were published in *The Social Science Journal*.

Lead study author Jerome Koch, PhD, a professor and associate chair of sociology at Texas Tech University, tells Yahoo Health that he was surprised by his findings. “There’s just this weird paradox, only among women with four or more tattoos.”

According to research conducted by [Harris Interactive](#), one in five U.S. adults has at least one tattoo, and women are slightly more likely than men to have a tattoo. Four or more tattoos might make a difference because, at that point, the body art becomes more of a person’s identity, Koch says.

Why does this paradox exist? Koch theorizes that it’s about empowerment, similar to how breast cancer survivors feel about their bodies after going through a health battle.

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“In a way, I suspect suicide survivors



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are reclaiming their minds and taking ownership of themselves,” he says. “Women are bombarded with things like fat-shaming and hyper-sexualized expectations. Body art is one way that women especially might take control of their bodies.”

Los Angeles-based therapist Nancy Irwin, PsyD, agrees. “A lot of people who have been suicidal and were rescued or changed their mind did the work to unearth the reason for why they did that,” she tells Yahoo Health. “It could be a great freedom and empowerment over their trauma or negative self image, whatever the cause of that.” In that case, Irwin says the tattoos may become a “badge of honor,” making a statement that they’re a different person now, inside and out.

Irwin suspects the self-esteem likely comes before the tattoos since people often know in advance that others may judge them for having a lot of body art. “That usually takes a great deal of confidence, in and of itself,” she says.

But Kirby Farrell, PhD, author of “Beserk Style in American Culture” and

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a professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, tells Yahoo Health that suicide attempts are often linked to an intense concern with a person's identity and idealized self-image. "A tattoo can make a hazy or conflicted identity seem particular and concrete," he says.

He warns that too much body art can be distracting for people who are struggling with identity. "An escalating number of tattoos may signify that the preoccupation with self has shifted to tattoos as a tool for improving morale," he says. "If one tattoo brings some relief, it could be tempting to add more in hopes of counteracting the underlying doubts."

Psychotherapist Tina Tessina, PhD, author of "It Ends With You: Grow Up and Out of Dysfunction" echoes the sentiment. "In my counseling experience, women who have a lot of tattoos tend to have trouble feeling alive," she tells Yahoo Health. "The pain of getting tattooed is one way to feel alive."

Despite the reason why some women

get tattoos, Koch says he hopes his work will help show that body art is emerging more as a form of empowerment, rather than simply a “mark of deviance.”

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