



PSYCHOLOGY

Mentally Healthful Eating

If you want to help a patient lose weight, help her discover why she really wants to. Researchers from the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, found that a woman who can honestly say, "I eat the way I do for the satisfaction of eating healthily," is more likely to keep her weight down.

Their study of 1,601 women looked at different methods of regulating eating behavior. The researchers used questionnaires to assess women's autonomy and how it meshed with their eating behavior.

They based their analysis on the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). In SDT, motivation is stratified along a continuum, from amotivation through external regulation (ie, rewards and punishments from others), introjected regulation (being motivated by guilt, shame, or social comparison), and integrated regulation (the behavior change has personal meaning and importance), to intrinsic motivation (autonomy). This last

theory, in which a person sees the importance of behavior change and feels that the change is linked with her core values, is considered to effect the most enduring change.

The participants were aged 40 to 50 years, an age range chosen for the high prevalence of obesity and particularly high risk of weight gain. The women answered questions on the 24-item Regulation of Eating Behavior scale, modified so that their answers finished the sentence "I eat the way I do...." For instance, the statement, "I eat the way I do because it is fun to create meals that are good for my health," indicated intrinsic motivation; whereas the statement, "I eat the way I do because other people around me nag me to do it," indicated external regulation. The researchers also asked the women whether they engaged in binge eating, how fast they ate, and how often they ate high-fat foods.

For every 10-unit increase in autonomous regulation, body mass index (BMI) was lower by 2.8%; whereas a 10-unit increase in controlled regulation was associated with a 2.9% higher

BMI. Responses at both ends of the scale showed dramatic associations with BMI. For every 5-unit increase in amotivation, BMI was higher by 4.8%. Each 5-unit increase in integrated regulation, by contrast, was associated with a 4.8% lower BMI.

Women who engaged in binge eating reported eating fast, eating high-fat foods, and were significantly more likely to have higher BMI. When the researchers controlled for possible food-related mediators, every 10-unit increase in autonomous regulation was associated with weighing 1.4 kg less (equivalent to a 2% lower BMI in a woman with a BMI of 25.8).

The researchers suggest that the technique of motivational interviewing encourages patients to resolve their ambivalence about behavior change and to explore the discrepancies between their valued life goals and their current behavior, thus helping them develop a sense of autonomy. ●

Source: Leong SL, Madden C, Gray A, Horwath C. *J Acad Nutr Diet.* 2012;112(9):1337-1346.
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