

The Psychology of Dieting



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Today's society places a lot of importance on appearance as a part of being accepted. The problem of weight and body concerns is not new, but it has received an increasing amount of attention over the past few years. Many people find themselves caught up in an unfair system of weight gains and losses that continue for a lifetime. Traditional weight loss efforts that involve limited calorie intakes often predict failure.

Traditional Thinking

To lose weight, many people start an eating pattern they call a diet. Diet is a word that has several meanings. Depending on the person's experience, diet can mean anything from nourishment to punishment. Many people also think of it in terms of restriction because of limits set by themselves or someone else. This way of eating involves many limitations in food selections and total calories allowed. Some people have attempted to follow 800-calorie diets for a few weeks or even months, but they usually find themselves overeating and regaining more weight than they lost. This is because this style of eating often creates a sense of deprivation with the restrictions. This style of eating, called restrained eating, usually in-

volves a very restricted calorie intake and excess attention to the types of food eaten.

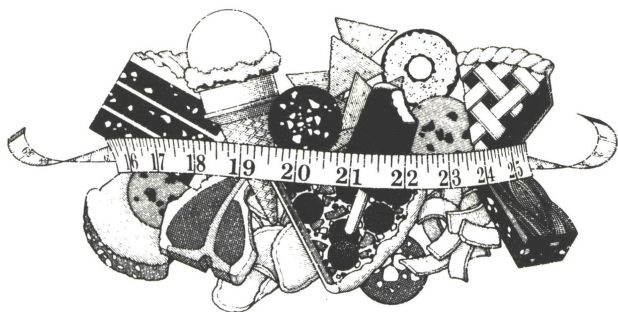
Traditional diet thinking has weight loss as its only goal. With this traditional thinking, any weight loss is called "progress." Self-acceptance and success come after losing weight, and exercise is only a tool for losing weight. Food is the enemy. Deprivation and will power are key factors and total perfection is a demand. Most dieters are out of touch with true physical hunger and often feel they have no choice in the decisions about whether or not to eat.

Research about eating patterns reveals many problems with this style of weight loss. It appears that people who continually deprive themselves from necessary calories end up overeating later. The body can only go for a certain amount of time before it has to have nourishment. A theory exists that this feeling of deprivation also creates a rebound effect. This rebound involves overeating large quantities of food in a very short period, or binging. Over time, binging creates excess weight gain because of the extra calories consumed. Sometimes, it leads to a condition known as bulimia, a serious eating disorder. Bulimia involves frequent overeating followed by vomiting or abuse of laxative or diuretic medications to rid the body of unwanted calories. Research literature shows some connections between traditional dieting and binging behaviors.

Non-Diet News

For all these reasons, a new philosophy exists about weight, food intake, and body size. This philosophy supports several theories, including genetics, lifestyle patterns, and psychological issues.

The genetics theory says that inheritance decides body composition. Our parents' and grandparents' body types are good predictors of



our own body composition. Heredity decides whether we are tall or short, large or small boned, blond or brunet. Heredity also decides some part of weight gain and body size.

Lifestyle patterns include exercise, smoking, food preferences, hobbies, and recreational activities. Some lifestyle choices are less active than others. The level of activity helps determine how many calories the body will burn.

Psychological issues can also result in underlying causes for keeping excess body weight. Some of these may include physical power, protection from violation, and insecurity about sexual attention. When the subconscious deals with issues of this nature for many years, they are very difficult to recognize. It is important to find the psychological reasons for maintaining the weight and body size. Because the problem is not entirely physical, it requires more than nutrition counseling.

The "non-diet approach" is now the treatment of choice for overeating. This approach involves making confident choices for improved health with gradual lifestyle changes. Self-acceptance starts the cycle, rather than finishing it. Exercise is fun and a source of energy renewal. Food is friendly and not used for consolation, comfort, or anger suppression. The person is in charge of making individual choices about feeding hunger in response to internal cues and only eats to feed physical hunger and provide satisfaction. The process of hunger and satiety is extremely important in regulating weight throughout this approach.

Lifestyle Changes

The non-diet approach to food involves education and therapy. Education is necessary to

help the person increase awareness of appropriate quality and quantity of food intake needed for the individual's health. Therapy helps a person sort through the various meanings food and weight have in the person's life.

Besides psychotherapy and nutrition counseling, overcoming overeating also involves adding exercise as a routine part of a person's lifestyle. Research supports the idea that regular exercise improves a person's sense of well-being. When people feel good about themselves, they take better care of their bodies.

To be effective, exercise needs to occur at least four times a week for 20 to 30 minutes durations. Some types of exercise include walking, water walking, jogging, running, stair-stepping, cycling, and aerobics dance classes. These exercises increase oxygen in the lungs and blood. This enables the brain and body to function at their best. If done consistently for 45 minutes at a time, exercise can be helpful in burning excess body fat. Exercise also serves to divert attention from food cravings and cues long enough to avoid an overeating episode.

Conclusion

Many people believe that weight loss requires a new approach and that it is time to put away outdated models of weight loss methods and use ones that consider the whole person. The key is to allow individuals control over their bodies, food choices, and eating behavior, with self-acceptance and body approval as the goals. With proper counseling, education, and support, more people have the opportunity to take charge of this problem for themselves. The results will truly be effective lifestyle changes.