

The Body Achieves what the Mind Believes

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The psychology of successful weight loss

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Introduction

Weight loss is a problem that concerns many people. Diets, exercise schedules and many other new ways of losing weight are proposed every day. But the psychological factors that help or hinder successful weight loss and lasting results are often overlooked.

Why is this? Weight loss may be seen as a lifestyle issue tied to a healthy diet and physical activity. On the surface, psychology may not appear to be a factor. Nothing could be further from the truth. Weight loss involves change, motivation and commitment. It can involve a significant shift in lifestyle and a need to maintain it for a long period of time. Stress, depression and anxiety can all be factors in hindering success. A positive mindset, knowing what motivates you and how to manage obstacles can help you achieve and maintain your weight loss goal.

This eBook focuses on some of the most significant psychological factors affecting successful weight loss and how they may impact you.

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Psychological factors that affect weight loss

There are many psychological factors that affect weight loss. We will be looking into some of the most significant and how they may affect you.

Motivation

Motivation is the reason you want to lose weight. Before starting a weight loss program, ask yourself why you want to lose weight and what your ultimate goals are.

Psychologists identify two kinds of motivation:

Intrinsic motivation occurs when you feel moved to do something. For weight loss, it is the type of motivation that involves wanting to feel better, to enjoy movement, to be healthier and so on.

Extrinsic motivation is motivation based on external rewards or punishments. For example, someone who is constantly being urged by others to lose weight might feel motivated by a desire to be rid of other's criticism.

Intrinsic motivation is the lasting one, the one that moves you to truly change. So before starting a weight loss program paint a picture of what you hope to achieve and how you want to feel. Keeping your reasons very clear will give you the will you need to commit to losing weight.

This is not to say that rewards shouldn't feature in your weight loss journey. It's good to set yourself milestones and rewards, preferably not associated with food. It's usually best to stay away from punishments or penalties. If you choose to penalize yourself too harshly, it may affect your motivation, while rewards will keep your spirits up.

Motivation Key Points:

- Be clear on the why.
- Know your personal purpose for losing weight.
- Focus on rewards.
- Set milestones and rewards in advance.



WHY YOU
WANT TO
LOSE WEIGHT



YES
YOU
CAN

Mindset

The next thing to consider is your mindset. In general terms, there are two mindsets: the fixed mindset and the growth mindset. A fixed mindset will not help you lose weight, because it involves thinking that your characteristics are fixed from birth and unchangeable. You might hold an underlying belief that your extra weight is part of who you are or that you are too unmotivated to lose weight. This mindset will lead you to self-sabotage.

The growth mindset is the one you need to cultivate. It involves a firm belief that you can become better and improve through hard work. Even if you have not lost weight before, you can do it now if you apply yourself. Your extra weight is not an unchangeable part of you, but rather something you can change if you want to.

Mindset Key Points

- Believe you can change.
- Think of yourself as a work in progress: if you try and learn, you can change your weight.

Stress management

An important aspect of successful weight loss is finding healthy ways of handling stress. Stress can drain your energy, making it more difficult for you to exercise. For many people it is natural to eat more when frustrated or anxious.

Think about the ways you manage stress now and pay special attention if eating is one of your self-soothing or relaxation strategies. Then consider other strategies you can implement. Meditation and exercise are shown to relieve stress and anxiety and have advantages for your health. Reducing overall stress in your life can set the stage for a more successful weight loss journey, by minimising triggers to over eating.

Stress Management Key Points

- Avoid eating as a way to deal with stress.
- Implement healthy strategies to deal with stress like meditation and exercise.
- See if you can reduce the stress in your life.



COMFORT EATING

ii Emotional factors

For many people, eating is a response to a negative emotion which they otherwise find difficult to manage. People tend to overeat when they are angry, afraid, lonely or sad. While we have all indulged in “comfort eating” to some extent. Others indulge in it a lot, sometimes to the point of bingeing, which can be a sign of an eating disorder (discussed in a later section). Sometimes you may eat just to pass the time or to alleviate boredom. Whether you tend to eat a little or a lot when emotional, it may be making it harder for you to lose weight.

Emotional factors can contribute to “non-hungry eating”. According to Victorian weight management specialist, GP Dr. Rick Kausman, understanding why and when you eat is another vital – but often overlooked – piece of the weight-loss puzzle. Many of us are not hungry on roughly 50 to 80 per cent of the occasions that we eat. “Most people have 10 to 20 different reasons why they eat when they are not hungry,” Kausman says (ABC Health and Wellbeing).

Reasons for non-hungry eating can include:

- eating because the food is there
- worrying you will get hungry later
- eating out of habit
- eating for emotional reasons
- habitually eating everything on your plate.

“It’s normal to do some non-hungry eating, but for many people a large proportion of their eating is non-hungry. We’ve lost that ability to use our body as a guide,” Dr. Kausman says. He encourages a more mindful approach to food, involving an awareness of your body, its signs of hunger and of satiety.

Think about what triggers your overeating. Try to eat only when you are hungry and seek other strategies to deal with emotions or boredom. Confiding in a friend, or writing about your emotional experiences can be a healthier way to manage difficult feelings. Express them in a way that is safe for you. Identify ways to keep busy when you are bored.

iii Emotions Key Points

- Consider which emotion(s) tend to make you want to eat.
- See what other strategies you can put in place to manage your emotions.



Goal setting

The next aspect of a successful weight loss journey is smart goal-setting. You might have a clear idea of how much weight you want to lose or how much exercise you want to commit to per day but it is important to see how realistic this is. You will not be able to go down several sizes in a month, but if you expect yourself to do this, you are setting yourself up for failure. Make sure your goals are realistic and take into account your personal history (e.g., if you have never exercised, you won't be running marathons next week).

Another important aspect of goal setting is to break large goals into smaller goals. What is your goal for tomorrow? What is your goal for next week? If you stick with a goal that is a year away, it is going to be very hard to stay committed to a daily weight loss program, because the result will feel too far away. Smaller, incremental goals are far more effective in that it is better to have smaller goals that can boost your motivation by giving you a sense of achievement each time you reach them.

Goal Setting Key Points:

- Keep your goals clear.
- Keep your goals realistic.
- Have smaller goals.
- Break your big goal into smaller objectives.

Positive attitudes and beliefs

Negative self-talk that is judgemental, harsh and critical is a motivation killer. If you are constantly telling yourself how lazy you are or how fat you are, it will be hard to get anywhere. It's best to approach weight loss from a position of self-care and self-love. Focus on encouraging yourself rather than punishing yourself. Avoid criticisms and judgments. This will lead to better results, even if it feels forced at first. Positive self-talk and positive beliefs about yourself are a habit you can develop if you choose to do so.



Positive Beliefs Key Points:

- Avoid judgments and criticisms, especially those directed at yourself.
- Praise yourself.
- Make a point of thinking and saying nice things to yourself several times a day.

Negative attitudes and beliefs

We have already mentioned the importance of encouraging and praising yourself and avoiding negative self-talk and criticism. But why is criticism such a bad thing? Negative self-talk is often mistakenly considered to be motivational but this is not true for the vast majority of people. Just like criticism that comes from others, negative self-talk plants and reinforces a harsh punitive mindset of being incapable, lazy and so on. It makes you more likely not to listen to yourself and to feel negative emotions (like fear, anger and sadness) that will stop you from moving forward with your weight loss. Essentially, each time you judge or criticize yourself, you are sabotaging your own efforts and reinforcing the idea that you cannot change, or that you are incapable of working hard.

Negative Beliefs Key Points:

- Negative self-talk is an effort to sabotage yourself.
- It kills your motivation.
- It leaves you feeling depressed or angry, not enjoying your body and not loving yourself.

Relationship issues and lack of social support

Problems within your significant relationships, conflict with significant others, or lack of social support have a significant detrimental impact on any weight loss journey. If you feel lonely or angry, you might use food as an easy way to comfort yourself. Social support can do a lot to keep you motivated on your weight loss program, while a lack of it can deprive you of resources you may need (like someone to listen to how you feel). If you feel alone, look for ways to ask others to help you with your goals.

Consider how the difficulties within your relationship are affecting you. Conflicts take up a lot of time and energy, so you may not feel motivated to diet or exercise. If you feel that conflicts are a significant obstacle to your success, think about the strategies you have to deal with them.

Social Support Key Points:

- Lack of social support and conflicted personal relationships can prevent you from losing weight.
- Seek help from people you care about.
- Seek new supportive healthy relationships.
- See what you can do to resolve conflicts in your relationship.
- Avoid overeating because of relationship issues.



Self-destructive behaviours

Self-destructive behaviours play a big role in interfering with successful weight loss and can ruin health in other ways. Which behaviours can be considered self-destructive? Smoking, drinking too much alcohol and neglecting to look after your physical and emotional health all fall under this category. Analyse such behaviours honestly and consider what they do for you. Are there ways of managing stress or painful emotions? Are they a way of sabotaging your efforts? Consider which habits you would like to remove from your life. Sometimes, before committing to big lifestyle changes, it can be a good idea to analyse which habits in your life might prevent those changes. For instance, smoking can get in the way of exercising and drinking can get in the way of any diet plan. If you feel these habits are a big part of your life, you may want to devote time and effort to changing them before you begin a weight loss program or in conjunction with one. It can be hard trying to change too much at the same time, so it's important to work out strategies that can help you.

Sometimes, self-destructive behaviours can go beyond just habits. They may become addictions or represent symptoms of depression and other problems. If you have an addiction, are experiencing depression difficulty, a weight loss program may not be what you need. Rather, addressing the emotional difficulties will be the key to long term successful improvements in your overall health.

Self-Destructive Key Points:

- Think about the habits that can prevent your weight loss and the role they play in your life.
- Consider which habits you may need to change.
- Consider if your habits are habits or go beyond that.
- If you feel your habits are too difficult to manage, seek help.



SELF CARE

Mindset Tools

Mindset tools can give you an idea of your ideas and attitudes towards eating, your body image and to weight loss in general. These tests can show if you're approaching weight loss as a "cure-all" or from a place of self-loathing and not self-love and self-care.

Mindset tools can also help identify if you have an eating disorder, or are at risk of developing one. In this case psychological and medical help is needed. A weight loss program will not treat the underlying cause of an eating disorder and may actually make things worse.

Mindset tools are best administered by a psychologist though some allow for self-reporting. Recommended are:

- Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-26)
- Body Attitudes Test (BAT)
- Eating Disorder Inventory-3 (EDI-3)

Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-26) is a self-screening measure to help you determine whether you might have an eating disorder that needs professional attention. This screening measure is not designed to make a diagnosis of an eating disorder or take the place of a professional diagnosis or consultation.

Body Attitude Test (BAT) is a self-report questionnaire developed for female patients. It has been tested in a large number of patients and control subjects (eating disorders, Weight Watchers, and normal subjects). This test can give you an idea of your weight loss expectations and whether you are at risk in terms of eating disorders.

Eating Disorder Inventory-3 (EDI-3) is a widely used by psychologists as it's a comprehensive psychometric test relevant to individuals with eating disorders. In addition, EDI-3 will also assess behaviours highly relevant to weight loss psychology, not only to eating disorders. *EDI-3 can only be administered and interpreted by psychologists.*

Excluding the EDI-3, there are many self-managed mindset tools available that can give you an idea of your mind set before starting a weight loss journey.

iv Eating disorders

The possibility of an eating disorder is an important consideration when considering a weight loss goals. There are different types of eating disorders. Some, like Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia Nervosa, involve having an unrealistic body image, while also engaging in unhealthy behaviours and potentially dangerous behaviours, such as overly restrictive dieting, bingeing and purging and excessive amounts of exercise. These disorders are focused on weight loss, although the people who have them are not always underweight. People with these disorders may believe that they are overweight and may try anything to lose weight but a weight loss program is the last thing they need. In binge eating disorder, the person may be overweight but unable to engage in a healthy diet and exercise plan, because their eating is related to the disorder.

If you feel that food and weight are the most significant issues in your life you can take the Eating Disorders Inventory (EDI-3) to check if you are at risk. If you fit some, even if not all the criteria for an eating disorder, then you should consider psychological and medical help.

A weight loss program is not indicated for people with eating disorders, because it is not effective in addressing the underlying emotional problems which usually drive the eating disorder and may exacerbate the disorder.

How Can Weight Management Psychology Help

Individuals who are trying to lose weight should understand the psychology of weight loss. Weight management psychology is the process of working with individuals to identify and understand patterns and behaviours that trigger difficulties when trying to lose weight.

- Relationship to emotional (comfort), compulsive or binge eating;
- Relationship to occupational environment and exercise
- Body image issues;
- Depression, Stress and Anxiety
- Lack of confidence

These are dynamic psychological core symptoms that are self-sabotaging and can prevent or limit the success of the individual from reaching and more importantly, sustaining their weight loss goals.



Promote industry stats

“Australia’s report card on weight management one of the worst in the world, 61 per cent of Australian adults and 25 per cent of children are overweight or obese. But it’s not as if we aren’t trying to slim down. In the last financial year, it’s estimated we spent \$745.6 million on low-calorie foods, diet cookbooks, supplements, lap bands and liposuction.” ABC News

Despite the huge financial investments being poured into various dieting and weight loss tools, weight management and obesity-related issues continue to grow, creating a significant burden on our health system and on our wellbeing as a society. Similarly, as individuals, we invest our time, money and energy into weight loss programs which ultimately fail to produce sustainable results. Clearly, our investments are not being used effectively.

Repeat offenders – the vicious diet cycle



“All weight loss plans and programs work... until they don’t.”

Individuals who are consistently able to maintain a healthy weight do not “diet”. In fact, diets are rarely the answer to weight problems. More often, they are one of the contributors to weight gain and obesity!

According to Psychology Today, **dieting**, defined as food or calorie restriction aimed at weight loss, is one of the most common and dangerous gateways into disordered eating. By severely restricting the amount of energy going into our body, we deprive our body (and our brain) of the fuel it needs to function and perform. In a state of starvation, depleted of energy, our brains cannot function at their optimal level: our judgement and decision-making abilities are impaired and we are more likely to make impulsive food choices. Our body, in turn, responds by slowing down our metabolic rate and storing extra fat deposits. This is called the “**famine response**”.

As any repeat dieter knows, we can only last so long on a strict diet before we “fall off”, “give in” and return to our former habits, or to compensate for the significant drop in energy by binge eating. Some people report experiencing an almost complete loss of control over their eating at this stage of the cycle, sometimes referred to as the “**feast response**”. However, by the time we get to this point in the Vicious Diet Cycle, our metabolic rate has slowed down, our muscle to fat ratio has decreased and we are more prone to storing extra energy as fat. In addition, we are likely to feel guilty, ashamed and powerless and to return to even stricter dieting to “make up” for our apparent failure. Thus the Vicious Diet Cycle is starts again / is **repeated**.

If you have gone through the Vicious Diet Cycle more than once, you are probably familiar with the feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness and guilt which many “repeat offenders” and “Yo-Yo Dieters” face. These often painful feelings and thoughts (along with self-blame and self-hatred) are at the core of the negative mindset which kills our motivation and leaves us feeling depressed.



Psychological Interventions which may help with weight loss

Psychologists have a range of tools and techniques which can target the key issues underlying your weight management difficulties:

1. Motivation

Psychological therapy can help you to clarify your goals and to keep you committed to your weight loss program. Through Motivational Interviewing techniques, your therapist can help you to identify and develop healthy, intrinsic motivators based on positive self-beliefs, to monitor your motivation and to address any “knocks” to your confidence which you may experience along your journey.

2. Mindset

Psychological therapy is all about creating healthy, self-affirming mindsets! Through effective Cognitive Behaviour Therapy techniques, your therapist can help you to challenge any negative or self-destructive thoughts or beliefs which you may hold about yourself or your abilities and to replace them with healthier, positive beliefs which will keep you on track.

3. Stress Management

Managing stress in a way which enforces motivation and encourages positive self belief is integral to Psychological therapy. Your therapist can help you to identify your emotional triggers to over-eating and to implement alternative, healthier

ways of dealing with stress, through various Relaxation and Stress Management techniques.

Similarly, your Psychologist can help you to identify your triggers for “non-hungry eating” and to develop your capacity to listen to your body for signs of true hunger and satiety, through Mindfulness techniques. A more mindful approach to eating can help you to make healthier food choices which are not driven by stress or negative emotions and to eat the right amount of food and avoid bingeing.

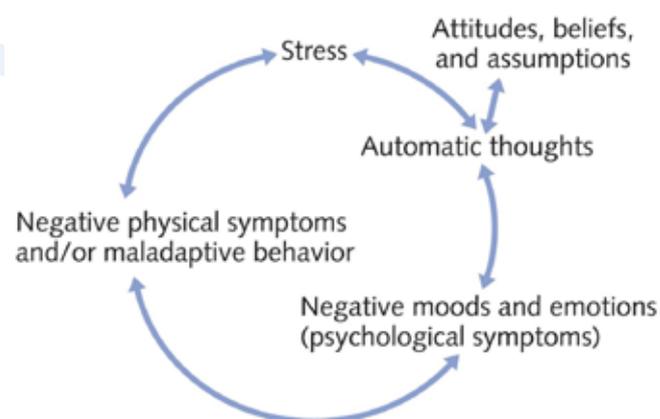
4. Emotional Factors

This is the key area where Psychological intervention can make a huge difference. Feelings or emotions are at the core of what it means to be human and are therefore also typically at the core of all human problems (including weight problems)! Psychological therapy can help you to identify, explore and manage negative emotions which may be underlying your unhealthy habits. It is often the case that we manage our difficult feelings through a form of self-attack, or self-sabotage, which can, in some cases, take the form of unhealthy eating. Similarly, overeating can be an attempt to give ourselves comfort and to numb difficult emotions. At the very least, we know that difficult feelings contribute to over-eating. Your Psychologist can help you to identify and explore the difficult emotions underlying your unhealthy eating and to express and manage these emotions in a healthy way.

In conclusion, weight management psychology involves working with individuals to identify and understand patterns and behaviours that trigger difficulties when trying to lose weight, including:

- Relationship to emotional (comfort), compulsive or binge eating;
- Relationship to occupational environment and exercise
- Body image issues;
- Depression, Stress and Anxiety
- Lack of confidence

The weight loss psychological cycle



Why should I financially commit to counselling?

Psychological therapy is actually a cost-effective way of directly addressing emotional difficulties or negative mindsets which can be a major contributing factor to your weight or over-eating. Without addressing these underlying problems, your financial commitments to gym memberships, personal training sessions and healthy food are effectively going to waste.

How many sessions will I need?

Your Psychologist will work with you to assess and identify the exact nature of the problem/s you wish to address and will be able to advise you about the most appropriate treatment or support you may benefit from. The results obtained from one of the self-managed mindset tools mentioned in this eBook (e.g. the Eating Disorder Inventory-3) may provide an initial guide to how much support you may need. However, the amount of time you invest in addressing the problem/s you identify as being important to you, will always be your decision and your Psychologist will use this as a guide throughout your treatment.

Conclusion

In the eBook we have identified some important psychological factors that play a role in helping or hindering successful weight loss. Some might apply more to you and others might apply less, but the truth is that you can't escape psychology if you want to lose weight successfully. Personalising your weight loss plan by identifying the factors that apply to you makes it more likely that your plan will fit your needs, that you will stick with it and achieve your weight loss goals.

The Body Achieves what the Body Believes



Further information

To arrange a psychometric test or make an appointment to discuss working with a psychologist contact Counselling in Melbourne 1300 967 734.

(Endnotes)

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