

Food for thought: Contravening lay beliefs of eating at heart of our dietary disasters

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Waste not, want not. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Don't snack before supper; you'll ruin your appetite.

These dietary pearls of wisdom have been dropped on children for decades, and University of Alberta researcher Robert Fisher says that while [people](#) remember them, they quite often have a hard time applying them. In an article recently published in the journal [Appetite](#), Fisher's research notes that while people know the rules surrounding good eating and proper nutrition, they seem to lack one common component that often costs them the battle of the bulge: willpower.

Eating up with the Joneses

Yet, he says, our eating habits are a result of the battle between two conflicting sets of norms—descriptive and injunctive. Injunctive norms are beliefs of what are right or wrong or good or bad in terms of behaviours. These values arrive externally from groups such as family, peers or government, or educational materials. Whether or not a person adheres to those values determines whether the person is rewarded or punished within that group. Descriptive norms, though, are those that define what most people do in terms of actions or behaviours. So, says Fisher, while we know that eating cheeseburgers might be bad for us, the signs in our environment give us the green light to consume.

"Not only is fast-food advertising very prevalent, but you see fast food

signs, restaurants and wrappers everywhere," he said. "I think as a result, our baseline notion of what is normal is also changing. It's a bigger part of our lives than it ever has been before and there's no going back."

Food for thought: the rules associated with eating

The focus of Fisher's study, developed with Laurette Dubé from McGill University, defined the lay beliefs of Americans with regards to rules about eating. Responses such as not snacking, always eating breakfast and not wasting food were common responses. Through a series of studies, Fisher was able to synthesize his findings into scales wherein these rules were weighed against factors such as eating behaviours, body satisfaction and social desirability.

"The goal was to demonstrate that these scales are a comprehensive inventory of North Americans' most important beliefs about eating," said Fisher.

Knowing and doing not the same

Fisher was surprised to find that people with higher body mass indexes had stronger beliefs associated with the rules than people with lower BMIs. Yet, he notes, that there are plenty of examples in society of people knowing what to do but acting in a contradictory manner. He says that what they did find in the study is that people with higher BMIs actually had stronger beliefs in the normative rules related to eating. The missing element, he said, was not following their individual belief structures.

"What we found is that if people undertake these behaviours, which are related to the norms, they tend to have a lower BMI," said Fisher.

"Having the [beliefs](#) alone is just not sufficient."

Conscientious objectors of bad eating habits?

Fisher says the issue of obesity seems to be of an almost epidemic nature in today's society. The key to solving the problem, he says, is not about repeating the messages about harmful and good [eating habits](#). He believes that issues such as impulsive eating can be curbed and changed, but what needs to be worked on is the resolve to follow the rules people already know and not give up.

"It's not a knowledge problem. People know what they need to do. It's just doing it or being motivated enough to do it, said Fisher. "It's really about changing behaviours.

"You have to be both willing and able to change."

Provided by University of Alberta

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