

Subtle goal reminders, known as primes, can offset hedonic effects of food and facilitate health behavior

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Research to be presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for the Study of Ingestive Behavior (SSIB), the foremost society for research into all aspects of eating and drinking behavior, introduces novel cost-effective strategies to facilitate healthy eating among weight-conscious consumers. A number of experiments, by Esther Papies and colleagues of Utrecht University, The Netherlands, now suggest that simply adding words related to health and weight on posters, restaurant menu's, or recipe cards can stimulate healthy food choices among dieters and overweight individuals, in a variety of real-life settings.

Affecting the choices of these individuals is especially relevant since their eating behavior is heavily influenced by attractive [food](#) temptations which abound in our daily lives. The current living environment in most Western societies makes weight control a difficult enterprise for health-conscious individuals. Numerous studies have now revealed that conscious intentions for healthy eating and dieting are not sufficient for [healthy eating](#) pattern - rather, consumers are heavily influenced by their eating habits, and by food temptations in their environment.

Furthermore, people struggling with their weight are especially susceptible to the effects of such easily available food temptations. Chronic dieters and overweight people show strong hedonic responses to tasty, high-calorie food cues in both behavioral and neuro-imaging studies, and easily overeat when they are around attractive food. Thus, it is especially important to bolster these individuals against these

detrimental effects of our "obesity promoting environment".

Previous research by Papies and colleagues has shown that priming methods can help dieters eat fewer high-calorie tasty snacks. In a field experiment, customers of a local butcher store were observed on days when a poster announcing a dieting recipe had been mounted on the door, and on other days when the poster was not present. When the diet recipe reminded dieters of their health goal, they ate less of the bite-size meat snacks the store offered than on other days. Customers who were not concerned with controlling their weight were not affected. Thus, goal priming is an effective strategy to help weight-concerned individuals translate their intentions into behavior, especially when faced with temptation .

More recent experiments have replicated this finding in different settings. A study now under review shows that subtle goal primes incorporated into the menu of a restaurant lead overweight and weight-concerned individuals to order more healthy meals, such as salads.

Most recently, this priming method was applied in a [field experiment](#) in a grocery store. Here, overweight and diet-concerned individuals who were handed a recipe flyer with health-related words before shopping bought less unhealthy snacks, such as chips, cookies, and cake. Interestingly, this was hardly affected by how much attention participants said they had paid to the recipes. It seems very little conscious awareness is needed for such primes to affect health behavior. Although preliminary, these findings are especially promising: food decisions made in the grocery store affect eating behavior at home, and that means the whole family could benefit.

This technique has great potential as an intervention to help weight control - it is unobtrusive, easy to implement and low in cost making it attractive to policy makers.

Provided by Society for the Study of Ingestive Behavior

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