

Significant others can influence extreme dieting

July 25 2013, by Glenda Fauntleroy

Women who are frequently encouraged by their significant others to lose weight are more likely to resort to unhealthy measures to do so, according to new research in the *American Journal of Health Promotion*.

The study finds that unhealthy weight [control behaviors](#), such as fasting, using [diet pills](#), and self-induced vomiting, are common among young adults and are often the beginning of more severe eating disorders, depression and other health problems.

The study surveyed 1,294 young adults in Minnesota between the ages of 20 and 31 who were in relationships. They were asked about their eating habits and whether their partner "diets to lose weight or keep from gaining weight" or "encourages me to diet to control my weight."

Almost half of the participants said their significant other encouraged them to diet. Encouragement, however, was often viewed as negative or critical rather than supportive.

Binge eating among women was nearly doubled if their significant other encouraged dieting "very much" (25.5 percent) compared to "not at all" (13.6 percent). Overall, more than 40 percent of the people surveyed had used extreme diet tactics in the past year, which were more common among women (51.2 percent) than men (29.9 percent)

Clinical psychologist Jennifer McClure, Ph.D., associate director of research, faculty and development at Group Health Research Institute,

who was not associated with the study, commented that young adults' eating habits are influenced both positively and negatively by significant others as a result of so-called modeling or peer pressure.

"In modeling, people make decisions about how to act based on their observation of others' behaviors. With peer pressure, they change their behavior because they feel it is expected of them," McClure explained. "Both of these can be powerful incentives for [behavior change](#)."

There are ways that significant others can best approach weight issues with their partners, said lead author Marla Eisenberg, Sc.D., of the department of pediatrics at the University of Minnesota.

"If someone is genuinely concerned about a loved one's weight, the recommendation is to discuss it emphasizing health rather than appearance, and focusing on adopting a healthier lifestyle long-term rather than dieting," she said.

"Families or couples can also address weight issues by engaging in healthier behaviors together to avoid isolating and stigmatizing one member of the family as having the 'problem,'" Eisenberg continued. "Encouragement such as, 'will you join me for a walk after dinner? I'd love the company' will probably be received better than 'You should skip the ice cream tonight.'"

Provided by Health Behavior News Service

Citation: Significant others can influence extreme dieting (2013, July 25) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-07-significant-extreme-dieting.html>

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