

Study investigates access to weight loss clubs for people with learning disabilities

September 29 2014, by Shemina Davis



Weighing scales

A study aimed at improving access to weight loss clubs like Slimming World for people with learning disabilities, is underway by researchers from the University of Sheffield.

Funded by the Medical Research Council (MRC), the study is investigating how easy it is for people with learning disabilities to go to commercial [weight loss](#) clubs. To kick the project off, qualitative research has been carried out amongst groups of people with learning disabilities, to find out what they know about [healthy eating](#) and exercise, as well as practical elements like how people shop, cook and eat and how they manage their budgets.

Dr Liz Croot, from the University's School of Health and Related Research (ScHARR), who is leading the project, alongside Research Assistant Melanie Rimmer, said: "Our findings so far indicate that people with learning disabilities have a great deal of knowledge about healthy eating. But like the rest of us, they can find it difficult to put that knowledge into practice. They've told us the most important thing when trying to change your lifestyle is support from someone who understands you. That's where a peer-support group, like a slimming club, can be much more effective than simply giving them information, such as leaflets or recipes."

However the researchers have found that despite people with mild to moderate learning disabilities being more likely to be obese¹ and have poorer health than the general population², they are often not even aware of the existence of weight loss clubs such as Slimming World. In addition, many rely on carers and personal assistants to take them around and therefore may not have access to the support to help them go. Furthermore, even those that have managed to enquire about joining may find diet plans and general weight loss materials complicated and hard to follow.

The next stage of the research project, will involve a national survey on the Slimming World website to recruit any members who have learning disabilities, as well as leaders or 'consultants' who have already run groups which included members with learning disabilities. A sample of these participants will be interviewed to find out what aspects of the intervention work well for them, and what can be modified to make it more accessible and relevant for people with learning disabilities.

Guided by a steering group which is made up of people with learning disabilities, the study will see the steering group advise on matters such as development of Easy Read participant information documents and consent forms. They will also advise on the structure and format of focus

groups and interviews.

The project aim will be to identify a set of practices which will allow greater access to, and benefit from, mainstream commercial weight loss clubs for people with learning disabilities. The researchers hope that some of their findings will be transferable to other mainstream commercial health and fitness activities, such as gyms and yoga classes.

"People with mild to moderate learning disabilities are more likely to be obese than people in the general population, and they have much poorer health outcomes," said Dr Croot. "Improving their access to mainstream groups and services is a disability rights issue. And improving their access to health and fitness groups is a public health issue."

More information: Melville CA, Cooper SA, Morrison J, Allan L, Smiley E, Williamson A: "The prevalence and determinants of obesity in adults with intellectual disabilities." *J Appl Res Intellect* 2008, 21 (5):425-437.

Emerson E, Baines S, Allerton L, Welch V: "Health inequalities and people with learning disabilities in the UK:" 2010. Durham: Improving Health & Lives: Learning Disabilities Observatory; 2010.

Provided by University of Sheffield

Citation: Study investigates access to weight loss clubs for people with learning disabilities (2014, September 29) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-09-access-weight-loss-clubs-people.html>

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