

Thoughts drive dieting plans but feelings drive dieting behavior, study finds

May 5 2015, by Bert Gambini



A majority of American adults say they've tried dieting to lose weight at some point in their lives, and at any given time, about one-third of the adult population say they're currently dieting.

Yet 60 percent of American adults are clinically overweight or obese and more than 16 percent of deaths nationwide are related to [diet](#) and physical activity.

"There is clearly a disconnect if we have a majority of the population that has tried to lose weight and a majority of the population that is overweight," says Marc Kiviniemi, a public health researcher at the University at Buffalo. "People are planning to diet and trying to diet, but that's not translating into a successful [weight loss](#) effort."

Many issues, from biological to environmental, determine effective weight control, but how people manage their own [behavior](#) is a big piece of that puzzle.

Dieting is a process that involves a plan to change eating behavior and behaving according to that plan. But the factors that guide diet planning differ from those that guide actual diet behavior, according to the results of Kiviniemi's new study with Carolyn Brown-Kramer of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln published this month in the *Journal of Health Psychology*.

"The crux of the disconnect is the divide between thoughts and [feelings](#). Planning is important, but feelings matter, and focusing on feelings and understanding their role can be a great benefit," says Kiviniemi, associate professor of community health and health behavior in the UB School of Public Health and Health Professions.

Plans to change behavior are a function of thoughts, the belief that weight loss is possible by making better [food choices](#). But when it comes to making a food choice and deciding to execute the plan, feelings guide behavior.

"If you're sitting back conceiving a plan you may think rationally about the benefits of eating healthier foods, but when you're in the moment, making a decision, engaging in a behavior, it's the feelings associated with that behavior that may lead you to make different decisions from those you planned to make."

The findings highlight the shortcomings of deprivation diets or diets based on food choices that ignore people's preferences.

"First of all, the deprivation experience is miserable. If you didn't associate negative feelings with it to start, you will after a few days," says Kiviniemi. "The other thing that's important is the distinction between things that require effort and things that are automatic.

"Planning is an effort that demands mental energy, but feelings happen automatically. Deprivation or anything that demands a high degree of self-control is a cognitive process. If you put yourself in a position to use that energy every time you make a food choice that energy is only going to last so long."

Kiviniemi says dieters should seriously consider enjoyment when framing and shaping a behavior change.

"In the dietary domain, eating more fruits and vegetables is fabulous advice. But if you have [negative feelings](#) about those food choices, they might not represent elements of a good plan," says Kiviniemi. "It's not just about eating healthy foods. It's about eating the healthy foods you like the most."

It's not easy, and a lot of work is required to move intention to action, which is why Kiviniemi says planning should be broadly based on both thoughts and feelings.

"Think seriously about how you're going to implement the plans you make to change your behavior, and that includes not only the feeling component, but how you plan to overcome a negative reaction that might surface during a diet."

It's not just the knowledge of what we're eating, but consideration of

how we'll feel having decided to eat those foods, he says.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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