

# New research says that increasing personal happiness produces easier weight loss

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This is an image of a weight scale. Credit: CDC/Debora Cartagena

Many people believe that if they lose weight they will be happier about themselves, but new research by the University of Adelaide is suggesting people take the opposite approach.

School of Psychology PhD candidate and clinical psychologist, Sharon Robertson, has found a direct correlation between obesity and a lack of

mental well-being, and believes that if people focus on improving their happiness, rather than solely on losing weight, [weight loss](#) may come easier.

"Our preliminary research looked at happiness and well-being in people who are obese," says Ms Robertson.

"We used a national sample of 260 adults, separated into five categories according to their [body mass index](#) (BMI): normal weight, overweight, and obese classes one, two and three.

"We found that those who were obese were more likely to be depressed and experience less positive emotions than the normal and overweight groups, and this lack of well-being may be contributing to weight loss failure," she says.

Ms Robertson's research has also been looking at the impact of positive psychology techniques on weight loss.

"Positive psychology techniques promote positive thinking and positive feelings, and this 'feel good' effect may lead to an increase in motivation. In the case of weight loss specifically, it can promote weight loss behaviour," says Ms Robertson.

"We recently trialled this approach on women in a small pilot study. Over a four-week period we worked to improve their hope, personal strengths, gratitude and general happiness.

"The psychology sessions did not focus on weight loss, however, half of the participants lost weight over the course of the intervention. And at 12-week follow up, three quarters of the participants had lost additional weight," she says.

While in the early stages, Ms Robertson believes her findings support the idea of promoting positive psychological health in weight loss programs.

"There is no joy in focusing on weight loss, particularly if someone is constantly failing to lose weight," says Ms Robertson.

"I'm not saying that traditional programs are ineffective, but for those who have had little success with weight loss, perhaps focusing on their psychological health first will lead to better outcomes.

"Traditional weight loss programs may benefit from including a positive psychological approach to improve happiness and motivation, and to facilitate weight loss goals," she says.

Ms Robertson is hoping to continue researching psychological well-being and weight loss upon completion of her PhD, and test her approach more rigorously.

Provided by University of Adelaide

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