

You eat what you are? Changing identity to motivate healthy eating

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Credit: Wikipedia.

If you've resolved to eat more healthily this New Year's, you might find that imagining yourself as a healthy eater is the key to changing your behaviour for the better.

Writing in the journal *Self & Identity*, Amanda M. Brouwer and Katie E. Mosack explore the concept of 'self as doer' and whether it could be of use in changing people's eating habits.

As Brouwer and Mosack explain, the concept of 'self as doer' links identity with [behaviour](#). "The more one identifies with a particular role, the more likely one is to participate in role-related behaviors," they write. Thus, when it comes to eating better: "It stands to reason that the very process of conceptualizing the self as a 'healthy eater' brings about

greater identification with this role."

To put their theory to the test, the pair attempted to influence the eating habits of 124 women. Each was provided with information about portion sizes and asked to create food diaries for the six-week period of the study. They were then split into three groups; the first was provided with standard educational material about nutrition, the second was treated as a 'control', and the third asked to create six 'identity statements'.

These statements took the form of 'identities' created from the participants' own healthy eating goals. If participants wanted to eat more fruit, they were encouraged to think of themselves as 'fruit eaters.' If they wanted to make better drink choices, then they thought of themselves as 'less soda drinkers', and so on.

The results of the study showed that the 'self as doer' approach has potential. Women assigned to that group maintained their healthy-eating habits over the course of the study, whereas women in the other two groups actually ate less healthy food as the weeks wore on. Women in the 'self as doer' group also ate one portion more a day of healthy food than those in the other two.

But (perhaps most promisingly) participants in the 'self-as-doer' group gave Brouwer and Mosack a lot of positive feedback about the approach: "They reported how the exercise of thinking of themselves as 'doers' motivated them to make different health behavior choices ... [even] in situations where the imagined healthy choice was not preferred."

This study demonstrates a novel and effective way to encourage people to make better diet choices. It also demonstrates that simply educating people about nutrition is not enough to help them see a New Year's resolution through.

More information: Amanda M. Brouwer et al. Motivating Healthy Diet Behaviors: The Self-as-Doer Identity, *Self and Identity* (2015). [DOI: 10.1080/15298868.2015.1043335](https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2015.1043335)

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