Changes in dieters' social networks may undermine weight-loss efforts

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Efforts to lose weight may be unsuccessful because of an important mismatch between the social contacts created by individuals desiring to lose weight, and the factors that are actually beneficial for achieving weight loss goals, according to a Yale study.

Published online in the journal *Obesity*, the study evaluated how an individual's desire to lose weight is associated with changes in social contact with others perceived to be either thinner or heavier. Matthew A. Andersson, postdoctoral associate at the Center for Research on Inequalities and the Life Course in Yale's Department of Sociology, and his co-author, Nicholas A. Christakis, the Sol Goldman Family Professor of Social and Natural Science, examined how individuals change their close social relationships when desiring to lose weight and whether these changes help to achieve or undermine weight-loss goals.

According to the researchers, individuals hoping to lose weight interacted more frequently and were more likely to possess social ties with heavier individuals while lessening their interactions and decreasing their likelihood of ties with thinner individuals. "We want to gain a closer understanding of how social networks shape the desire to lose weight in the first place," Andersson says. "We were surprised to find that individuals who desire to lose weight may make social network changes that undercut their weight loss goals."

The researchers suggest that a personal motivation to lose weight may elicit increased social involvement with heavier individuals due to the fact that those who desire to lose weight are more likely to experience weight discrimination and stigma. Individuals may manage this stigma by selecting similarly heavy peers.

While these network changes may be consistent with managing weight stigma, they also tend to diminish weight loss. These findings may help explain unsuccessful weight loss attempts in the population.

"By publishing this study, we are contributing to knowledge about how social networks relate to body mass. Future research should track actual peer body mass to gain more insight into what we found in this study. With a fuller understanding of how social networks relate to weight loss,

interventions may better address any interpersonal dynamics occurring outside clinical settings," says Andersson.

Provided by Yale University