Your diet plan isn't working? New research explains why

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Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Many diet plans are doomed from the start. The reason? Dieters tend to adopt the wrong strategies, often planning to ditch their favorite foods and replace them with less-desirable options, according to new research from Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business.

Conversely, successful dieters focus on adding healthy foods - foods that they actually like, said Meredith David, Ph.D., assistant professor of marketing at Baylor. She is the lead author on the study, "Saying 'No' to Cake or 'Yes' to Kale: Approach and Avoidance Strategies in Pursuit of Health Goals," published in the journal *Psychology & Marketing*.

"Our research shows that instead of creating rules to avoid one's favorite treats, dieters should focus on eating healthy foods that they enjoy," David said. "Dieters who restrict themselves from consuming the foods they love most may be setting themselves up for failure. Instead, they may be better off by allowing occasional 'treats' and focusing attention on healthy foods that they enjoy and making it a point to include those tasty, but healthy foods in their diet."

The outcomes of the research - three studies and a total of 542 study participants - hinged on a person's level of self-control.

"In coming up with plans to enhance one's health and well-being, low self-control individuals tend to set themselves up for a harder pathway to success by focusing on avoiding the very foods they find most tempting," David said. "Our data reveals that individuals who are generally more successful at reaching their goals tend to develop more motivating plans regarding the inclusion of healthy, well-liked items and the exclusion of unhealthy items that are not one's favorites."

The research found:

- When asked to list specific rules that individuals might use to guide their food consumption, a large percentage of individuals listed rules that involve restricting and avoiding certain foods. This was particularly the case among low self-control individuals - those who generally have less success in reaching their goals. Individuals who are generally more successful in goal pursuit tended to list rules that involved things they should approach and/or consume.

- When thinking of unhealthy foods to avoid as a part of a diet, low self-control individuals think of foods that they really like - their favorite snacks, and most tempting items. High self-control individuals think of foods that they like but could reasonably forgo.
- When thinking of healthy foods to eat as a part of a diet, low self-control individuals think of foods they do not like, such as those that they find highly unpalatable (e.g., Brussels sprouts). High self-control individuals think of foods they enjoy eating (e.g., strawberries).

"Frequent attention is given to health advice surrounding well-intentioned lists of 'magical' foods that everyone should eat or practically 'poisonous' foods that people should avoid consuming," David said. "The next time you decide to go on a diet or seek to improve your health by altering your food consumption, opt for strategies that focus on including healthy foods in your diet, and focus specifically on those healthy foods that you really enjoy eating."

More information: Meredith E. David et al. Saying "No" to Cake or "Yes" to Kale: Approach and Avoidance Strategies in Pursuit of Health Goals, *Psychology & Marketing* (2016). DOI: 10.1002/mar.20901

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