

ACHIEVING AND MAINTAINING OPTIMAL BODY WEIGHT BY SAVORING, NOT JUST COPING: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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Abstract

The most widely used indicator of overweight is the Body Mass Index (BMI), which is defined as a person's weight in kilograms, divided by height in meters squared. Recommended BMI cut points for overweight have been set at 30, 27, and recently at 25 by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI). Overweight is becoming a public health issue since more than 50% of the US adult population has a Body Mass Index (BMI) over 25, and 20% of the population has a BMI over 30 categorizing them as extremely obese (Kuczmarski & Flegal, 1994; Strawbridge, Wallhagen, & Shema, 2000). Overweight is becoming a global epidemic (Berg, 1999; World Health Organization, 1998).

We maintain a good health state through behaviors and habits that we practice throughout our lives. Eating behaviors and habits allow us to maintain body weight, and play an important role in our wellness. Several factors; biological,

social, environmental, and temporal might have an effect on our eating behaviors. In some instances, they will result in overweight that will make us search for alternatives to lose those extra pounds. The most common alternative is going on a diet to lose weight. An international study of well educated young men and women around the world showed Colombia had a BMI of 21.8 for men and 20.6 for women (Wardle, Haase, & Steptoe, 2006).

BMI between 18.5 and 24.9 is defined as the normal range (NHLBI Obesity Education Initiative Expert Panel, 1998). Due to this situation, we focus this research on the positive side of weight control; that is, the types of behaviors and motivators that students are using to control and maintain their bodyweight. Are they working? But are they safe?

To understand what is working, the four factor model of perceived control: avoiding, coping, obtaining, and savoring (Bryant, 1989) is used. Savoring is defined as the positive counterpart of coping. People have capacities to attend to, appreciate, and enhance the positive experiences in their lives (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). The Oxford Unabridged Dictionary (Simpson & Weiner, 1989) defines the verb to savor as: (1) Appreciating the enjoyment of the taste of food; and (2) Appreciating the enjoyment of any experience.

Objective

The purpose of the study is to identify eating behaviors and motivators that allow youths to control and maintain body weight. The transition from late adolescence to young adults is a critical stage for developing obesity (Nelson, 2008). This article is a preliminary study of eating behaviors in a normal weight population (ages 17 to 25).

Method

To achieve this objective, a study to explore the factors that have an effect on eating behaviors, such as: eating fast or slow, watching or not watching TV while eating, valuing or not valuing smell and appearance, eating or not eating food to overcome anxiety created by other factors, staying at a healthy weight or bouncing back, and using a diet that is healthy or is too harsh was conducted in the second semester of 2009 at Universidad Icesi. Eight one-on-one interviews which lasted up to 30 minutes were conducted (Table 1

Guide on the interviews). A questionnaire was given to other 60 undergraduate students of the school of business; 40 female and 20 male students.

Table 1. Guide on the interviews.

1. What do you like to eat? How often do you eat?
2. When at the university, what do you eat? Why?
3. How much do you enjoy eating?
4. Tell me an experience worth remembering because you enjoy a meal. What happened? How did you feel during the day?
5. Going back to your experience, did you savor the moment? The food? Or did you just relax and enjoy it?

Preliminary Results

The results showed that 75% of the respondents had BMIs within the accepted normal range (18.5-25 Kg/m²), 18% had BMIs over 25, and 7% had BMIs below 18.5.

The taste of food, the appearance of the plate and the eating place were ranked among the most important factors in enjoying a meal.

- “To enjoy food, the place, the smell, the appearance, and the taste are important.”
- Food is to be enjoyed; one has to be conscious of what one is doing. If I eat fast, I do not enjoy food. I do not watch TV while eating.”
- Other factors such as time and company were also considered important.
- “I like to eat with someone, to share the moment, and to talk.”
- Weight lost and body image perceptions were the most common motivations for going on a diet. Water, fruits, and vegetables were considered healthy foods. Fat and large food portions were considered bad for your health. There was a perception that good eating habits means eating a little of everything.
- “I feel much better since I learned to eat.”
- “To learn how to eat was the best decision I have ever made. Too bad I did not know before for not having to worsen my health.”

The study showed that women are more concerned about body weight and body image than men. The students understood the meaning of healthy foods and life style but it seems like not all of them live that way.

Future Research

Most of the student population seems to be within the BMI normal range. There are two possible ways of achieving it that can be drawn from the interviews and questionnaires. There are social factors; such as, body image and body perception by others as the driving mechanism for being weight fit, and psychological factors; such as, pressure and anxiety caused by academic requirements are one of the driving mechanisms for compulsive eating or not eating. There seems to be a tradeoff between the two. It is important to find out and compare in a larger study the strategies students use to achieve and maintain their body weight in the optimal BMI range, as compared with those students outside the optimal range. Coping and savoring as part of the same continuum might be complementary ways to attain and maintain optimal body weight. Social pressure, individual differences, and anxiety among other factors are part of everyday life for all of us. However, not everybody has the strategies to cope with them in an appropriated way. It is important to find those individual, social, and environmental factors and the strategies used by students to achieve and maintain optimal body weight without any health hazard to them. Savoring is one of those strategies to enjoy and savor pleasant moments and life experiences that can shape good dietary practices and active behaviors.

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