

Self-determination: the key to successful weight loss and maintenance programs

Abstract

While studies show that most people are not able to keep weight loss for the long-term, probably due to the lack of motivation, recent studies show that the effective choice and implementation of motivational strategies are fundamental to building up positive-thinking and long-term motivation, as well as succeeding at habit-formation. This manuscript provides qualitative research on the effect of motivation as a factor in behavioral interventions to reduce overweight or obesity, highlighting the importance of self-determination for succeeding in long-term weight loss and maintenance programs.

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Introduction

Obesity is an increasing epidemic that requires urgent public health solutions.¹⁻³ Efforts to decrease obesity or overweight rates have focused on interventions at multiple levels, including policy, environment, community, as well as approaches at an individual level.⁴⁻⁶ The degree of weight loss and maintenance success depends on several factors, such as program completion, social support, and motivation for behavior change.⁷⁻⁹ An analysis at the individual level is important because the motivation for weight loss is extremely effective,⁶ and can be used as a predictor for controlling weight successfully.^{7,10,11}

Studies have shown that approximately 80% of people are not able to keep weight loss for the long-term. This is likely due to the lack of motivation over time. Recent studies^{6,12} have clinically and scientifically proved that the effective implementation of motivational strategies, such as: any choice of food/activity (personal preference vs pre-established diets/routines) and simple rewarding strategies, are very important to building up positive-thinking and long-term motivation, as well as successful habit-formation.

Motivation for weight loss programs has been mostly studied using quantitative approaches.¹³⁻¹⁴ Further, theories such as the Self-Determination Theory (SDT),¹⁵ which offers a broad framework for understanding the factors that promote human motivation and psychological blooming, have been strongly supported for weight loss and maintenance programs at the individual level.⁶ Thus, SDT, which considers the mechanisms for behavior change, may enhance the success of weight loss and maintenance interventions.

Methods

A single individual was subjected to a case study. The participant showed to have a strong commitment to improving both physical and mental health rather than physical appearance. The values of the Body Mass Index (Normal category: 18.5–25) were transformed into ideal weights, based on height and weight, and further sub-categorized into three categories.⁶ A comprehensive bibliographic review, regarding the best psychological approaches used for weight management and motivational programs, was conducted, and the most informative parameters were incorporated into a mobile app.

Results

This study suggests that “Innate internal motivation”, the one

coming from inside a person, not sustained by external rewards, can lead to long-lasting life-changing improvements. “External motivation”, however, such as compliments, trying to fit into a smaller body-size, or winning a karate competition, for example, might be ok for a start, but long-term motivation rather depends on the person values and determination to achieving goals. When it comes to weight loss and health, internal motivation involves giving more importance to the current health and happiness status than giving it to superficial ideas, such as physical image. Positive thinking, such as reaching a “healthy weight”, is more important in the long run than a simple image of being better good looking, although the second will finally be a collateral side effect, rather than the major focus of motivation. Vague thoughts about future looks, for example, are less motivating than the truly measurable post-workout feelings of happiness produced by the release of endorphins.

The internal motivation to lose weight and be healthy might not come naturally to everyone, but fortunately, it can be acquired and implemented. Successful factors include: Competence, Autonomy and Relatedness, the main self-determination factors involved in building up motivation and engagement (Figure 1), together with other factors such as: Understanding the reasons to be healthy; Sticking to a plan; Rational thinking; Self-analysis; Avoid self-sabotaging; The selection of smart goals and strategy; Implementing healthy habits; Ensuring success; Establishing third-party contracts; Being patience; Taking breaks (coffee/tea); Exercising (walk/run); Mindfulness (a few minutes is better than nothing); Finding inspiration; Socializing; Balancing failure; and/or Measuring and celebrating progress.

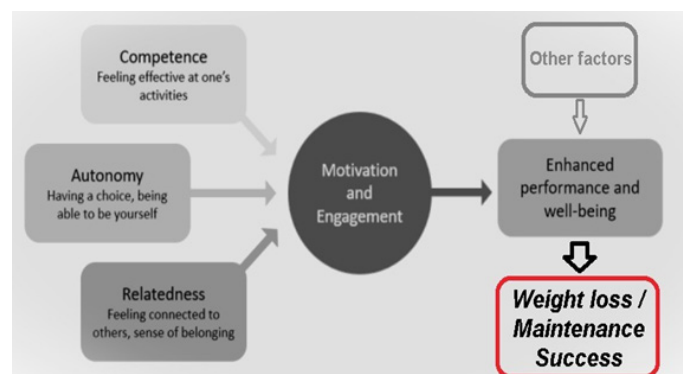


Figure 1 Self-determination theory and weight loss/maintenance success.

The mobile app: “weight loss motivator”

Given the importance of motivation to effectively implement any weight management program, it would be interesting to evaluate the level of motivation before implementing any strategy and to monitor progress. The “weight loss motivator” app,¹⁶ evaluates an individual level of motivation, providing a list of recommendations to help boosting motivation, warranting long-term weight loss and maintenance success (Figure 2). Based on 14 habits and psychological questions (see methods), the app: 1) Calculate the level of Weight loss/Maintenance Motivation; 2) Give advice to boost motivation; and 3) Provides useful information and tips for future actions.

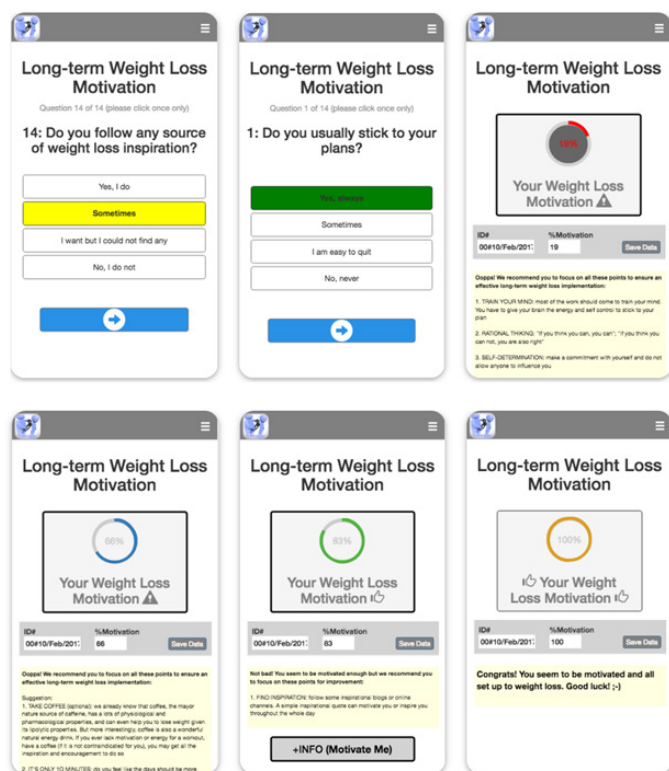


Figure 2 Weight loss motivator screenshots.

Conclusion

This manuscript provides support for the effect of motivation as a factor in behavioral interventions to reduce overweight or obesity and further weight maintenance, highlighting the importance of self-determination for succeeding in long-term weight loss and maintenance programs. If an individual fully endorses weight loss-related behavioral goals and feels more competent and autonomous (self-determination theory), this effort is more likely to result in long-lasting behavior change. Self-determination and continuous motivation is the key to success. Even if people sometimes have to face different trials during weight loss/maintenance, such as metabolic adaptations or temporarily lost control because of, for example, holiday periods, it is easy to go back on track as long as the motivation is there. Understanding the motivation for behavior change and completion is essential to reach goals effectively and sustaining weight loss and maintenance. Enhancing the motives for weight loss may help to improve outcomes in weight-loss and maintenance programs. Furthermore, a wide implementation of modern technologies, such as the “weight loss motivator” mobile app (16) or traditional approaches,

aiming to measure and enhance intrinsic internal motivation for weight loss and maintenance purposes may be beneficial.¹⁷

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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