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# Love, money may help weight loss

The Boston Globe



A study from the University of Connecticut says couples not only tend to gain weight together, they can also lose it as a pair, even if only one of them is enrolled in a formal program.

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Globe Correspondent / January 5, 2009

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Some things can't be done for love nor money. But when it comes to losing weight, love and money seem to be very good motivators.

Two recent studies, drawing lessons from social networks and behavioral economics, suggest that one spouse's successful weight loss can rub off on the other, and, separately, that monetary reward is an effective way to help shed pounds. Taken together, they provide timely information in this season of diet resolutions for the new year.

The study from the University of Connecticut says that couples not only tend to gain weight together, they can also lose it as a pair, even if only one of them is enrolled in a formal program. The spouses of the patients who attended regular meetings to encourage making dietary changes lost about five pounds over the course of a year, according to the results of the large clinical trial that examined weight loss strategies for people with type 2 diabetes.

"It was impressive, given they were not involved in the study program," Amy A. Gorin, assistant professor of psychology at UConn and lead author of the article published in the International Journal of Obesity, said in an interview. "Intervening with one person in a family has a larger impact than we realized before."

Harvard sociologist and internist Dr. Nicholas Christakis made waves with a study last year linking obesity to social networks. Gorin, who cites his work in her paper, finds the power of peer influence encouraging when it's flipped to the positive side.

Among the 357 couples she tracked, many of their food choices in the home became healthier - fewer potato chips and more fruits and vegetables, for example. Physical activity picked up, too.

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"For some people, it was motivating to see someone start to exercise and eat healthier food," she said, citing anecdotal evidence.

"I think my message would be, don't underestimate the power of the environment on you," she said. "If you start your New Year's resolution with 'I'm going to have enough willpower this time,' I think you set yourself up for failure if you don't have the support of the environment around you."

In another weight-loss study published last month, money was a powerful motivator. Researchers from the University of Pennsylvania tested a lottery program and a deposit contract among people trying to lose weight, comparing the two strategies to standard weight loss programs. All participants had a body mass index between 30 and 40, placing them in the obese category. Their total household income was about \$30,000.

Some participants played in a lottery that paid off only if they lost their target number of pounds. Others made a deposit of their own money, which they got back, plus a matched amount, if they achieved their weight loss goals. After 16 weeks, about half of the people in the incentive groups lost the goal of 16 pounds, or one pound per week, compared with only 10 percent of the people who had only monthly weigh-ins and no money rewards.

But money wasn't everything in the lottery and deposit groups. On top of the sums they received, which amounted to about \$300, they also stayed in daily contact with study staffers, sending their morning weights and getting text messages back about their progress. There were bonuses and "fresh starts" for the ones having trouble meeting their weekly losses.

"This approach was successful in keeping participants engaged, and significant weight loss was achieved without coupling the incentives program with an intensive, expensive weight loss program," the researchers reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association. Fewer people dropped out of the study compared with typical attrition rates in weight-loss studies, they said. Three months after the program was over, participants had regained about half the pounds they lost.

Even modest weight loss can improve health, lowering high blood pressure and blood sugar levels, the Penn health economists point out. But sustaining a healthy weight requires the well-known formula of consuming fewer calories and increasing physical activity.

"From my reading of the literature, one thing we have learned is different things work for different people," Alice H. Lichtenstein, director of the cardiovascular nutrition research laboratory in the Jean Mayer USDA Human Research Center on Aging at Tufts University, said in an interview about weight-loss in general. "There really is no magic answer because we know different people have different triggers with respect to eating."

That said, there is no harm in finding a weight-loss buddy and, says Gorin, "It would help if you pick someone who is going to do well." ■

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