

# Role for a sense of self-worth in weight-loss treatments

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## Helping your patient to enhance self-worth

### KEY MESSAGES FOR PATIENTS

#### Sense of self-worth

People with a healthy sense of self-worth treat themselves as persons of worth. Among other things, they consistently take care of their health. In the past, you might have viewed weight loss as desirable but of secondary importance because the expectations of other people and situations took precedence. Moving your health up your priority list is not selfish. It is not "me only"; it is "me too." When you reframe weight loss as regard for self, everything changes.

#### Internal solutions

Don't place conditions on what you will and won't do to lose weight. If you really want to be healthy, you must do what it takes. This adjustment might take some time, but you will find, as have those who have gone before you, that trim, fit people are trim and fit because of their efforts to be trim and fit.

#### Exercise

Research indicates that to lose weight and become fit you should work out a minimum of 1 hour, 4 to 5 times per week. If you rely on dieting without working out, you will have to reduce your food intake to the point that it will be very difficult to maintain. Your workouts should include aerobic exercise, such as running or using an aerobic machine, and regular weight-bearing exercise. Fit people do this. It is part of their lives. Join a gym. Hire a trainer for 2 or 3 sessions so you learn how to work out effectively. The gym manager will be able to connect you with a qualified trainer.

#### Nutrition

Eat clean. Animal fat, sugar, and fast foods are not your friends. In spite of conflicting claims from various diet books and weight-loss programs, healthy eating is not that complicated. Vegetables, fruits, fish, whole grains, and pasta are the primary features of a healthy diet. Don't make it complicated. If you feel underinformed about diet, there are many good sources of information available. For more details on the Mediterranean style of eating, check out the Mediterranean diet information at the Harvard School of Public Health.

#### Weight

Weigh yourself 2 to 4 times per week. Rather than slipping into denial, you will get regular feedback about the relationship between your weight and the choices that you make. This feedback is one type of the self-monitoring and self-awareness that is common to people who have self-worth.

#### Relationships

People with self-worth are in relationships with other emotionally healthy people. They have therapeutically repaired their historic ego damage and they don't participate in current relationships that include ongoing ego damage in the form of criticism, rejection, betrayal, or abandonment. It is very difficult to lose weight and take care of your health if you are in anxiety-generating relationships. Research shows that people who are overweight are most likely to overeat when they are in ego-damaging relationships.

### COMMENTS

Many of your overweight patients will be reluctant to make this crucial shift in perspective. Because of their historic ego damage and the positive feedback that usually comes from continuously putting others first, you will hear that they feel selfish about making time to attend to their own health. The self-care perspective is foreign to them. Sometimes it helps to point out that all loving relationships require self-sacrifice but only unhealthy relationships require sacrifice-of-self.

Most overweight people seek an external solution that will work for them. Nothing works if they don't, so protect your own emotional health. Your self-efficacy is not transferable. It is not helpful to package the message in well-meaning but misleading understatement. Respectfully point out that they will be treating themselves as persons of worth.

When encouraged to work out regularly, overweight people often say, "I'd like to but I don't have time." They are usually sincere, but they are actually illustrating their damaged sense of worth. When weight loss and fitness are expressions of self-care, "I don't have time" means "I don't have time to take care of my health; I'd like to but I just don't have time." If this statement were accurate, all busy people would be overweight and out of shape. Be respectfully firm while encouraging continued work on their self-worth enhancement.

Most overweight people have tried many different diets and programs. Their quest for "the solution" has exposed them to some valid information and considerable misinformation. Sometimes they get these enmeshed. Keep it simple. People who succeed long-term don't go on a diet. They apply the uncomplicated principles of sound nutrition.

Some of your patients will tell you that they don't want to become compulsive or develop eating disorders. It is true that excessive use of the scale can affect the mood of those who are eating disordered. It is also true that denial is as prevalent among overweight people as it is among drug and alcohol abusers. Regular appointments with your overweight patients will allow you to monitor this situation. Don't underestimate the denial factor.

If an overweight patient tells you that he or she is having marital or family problems, it is appropriate to recommend counseling. Your efforts to help your patient lose weight will be undermined if they have chronic problems at home. Children and adolescents who are overweight need family support and participation if they are to be successful. If you focus on the child alone, you run the risk of inadvertently making the child feel like the designated family problem.

Adapted from Cochrane G. *The self-worth odyssey*. Vancouver, BC: Devon Productions; 2006.