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Fridge magnets

New academic research explains why dieting ultimately leads to failure.

BY LINLEY BONIFACE

Dieting is the ultimate triumph of hope over experience. We know diets rarely work, yet we continue to believe there must be something – a miracle ingredient, a discovery about our body chemistry, a new way to boost our willpower – that will give us the key to unlock our inner thin person.

But for most us, that inner thin person is destined to remain in permanent home detention. Most dieters regain all the weight they lost within a year or two, sometimes ending up heavier than they were to start with.

Even more damagingly, cutting kilojoules is associated with a grim cycle of eating disorders, depression, low self-esteem and poor body image. Women dieters, in particular, tend to judge their health solely by what they weigh, making them less likely to adopt healthy lifestyle habits that could help prevent illnesses such as heart disease or cancer.

Under these conditions, it was inevitable that a non-dieting movement would spring up to counter the dieting movement. No more memorising how many kilojoules there are in an avocado, or lashing yourself with self-disgust over the number of scorched almonds consumed during the festive season: the non-dieting approach is all about learning to look at food – and, indeed, your own body – in a more positive, constructive way.

The non-dieting philosophy sounds appealing, but there has been relatively little research into its effectiveness. Caroline Horwath, a senior lecturer in the University of Otago's Department of Human Nutrition, decided to launch a New Zealand study into the innovative approach.

"The problem with dieting is that if you diet often, you lose touch with your body. Women say, 'What does hunger feel like?' 'How does it feel to feel full?' And it's not just a question of willpower: you cannot use willpower to suppress hunger in the long term," she says.

"Lots of dietitians are aware that diets don't work. Quite a few are trying to sup-

port the non-diet approach, but they need guidance on how to help carry it out. My priority is to get the evidence out there for them."

But before starting her study, Horwath introduced an extra element that, in retrospect, appears to be an important part of the puzzle. In 1999, she spent a sabbatical at Harvard University's Mind/Body Medical Institute, where she learnt about a programme that uses relaxation techniques to manage stress. Harvard's medical symptom-reduction programme had been found to ease a wide range of chronic conditions, including pain, heart disease and diabetes, but had not been used specifically for weight management.

Horwath decided to combine the non-dieting approach and the Harvard programme in a single study. She and a team of researchers recruited 225 overweight or obese New Zealand women for a 10-week randomised trial. The women all followed the non-dieting approach, but were split into three groups: one with group support, one without group support and one with training in the relaxation techniques used in the Harvard programme.

The techniques used were progressive muscle relaxation, abdominal breathing, meditation, hatha yoga and visualisation. The women were also trained in "mindfulness", with the aim of helping them break free from unhealthy behaviour patterns and automatic thoughts. They were encouraged to practise a relaxation technique for 20-25 minutes each day.

Although the women taking part in the study were told the research was about helping them to make sustainable healthy lifestyle changes, rather than dieting to lose weight, the women's priorities were clear – they all wanted to lose weight. All the women were considered at high risk of gaining more weight over time.

When the researchers followed up the women after a year, the results were promising. But the two-year results, which have just been compiled, are particularly significant.

The word "diet" was once used to describe a way of eating; now, it's a way of not eating.





Using the non-diet approach

- Take your focus off body weight. Put the scales away and replace them with achievable goals for sustainable healthy behaviours (such as going for a walk three times a week).
- Change the way you think about food. Instead of categorising foods as "good" or "bad", think of them as "healthy everyday food" or "sometimes" food. Regarding something as forbidden makes it more appealing.
- Listen to and learn to trust your body's signals. Before eating, rate your hunger/fullness levels from 0 (completely empty) to 10 (full). Long-term rigid dieting tends to result in women ignoring body signals in favour of following diet rules.
- Give yourself permission to eat when hungry. Fighting feelings of hunger is not sustainable long term.
- If you're not hungry, explore why you are eating. Are you bored, stressed, or using food as a reward or as a way of coping? Are you confusing hunger with thirst? Are you eating because food is there, or because the clock says it's time to eat, or because you were taught never to waste food? Explore healthier ways to cope with stress or painful emotions.
- Reduce the amount of eating you do when not physically hungry. In his book, *If Not Dieting, Then What?*, Dr Rick Kausman suggests saying to yourself, "I can have it if I really want it, but do I really feel like it?" or "I can have it if I want it, but will I really enjoy it?" This question is a great way to start becoming aware of what's happening for you around food.
- Eat slowly, and savour each mouthful. This will be hard to do unless you let go of "good" and "bad" labels on foods, as feeling guilty about eating usually leads to fast eating. At least once a day, give your full awareness with all your senses to the experience of eating (without watching TV, reading or other distractions).

Source: Caroline Horwath

In all three groups, women who stuck with the non-dieting approach managed to maintain their weight. Other studies into the non-dieting approach have had similar findings, which suggests this approach is ideal for women who are already overweight or obese and likely to gain more weight in future.

But the really exciting results came from the women who combined non-dieting with relaxation techniques. After two years, those who had continued to regularly practise the techniques lost an average of 2.5kg each. They also suffered less from depression, and had fewer medical symptoms such as back pain, stomach upsets, headaches, sleeping problems and diarrhoea or constipation.

"The women in the group that used the Harvard techniques as well as the non-dieting approach seemed to be working at a deeper level of change," says Horwath. "They were more aware of their thoughts and feelings, and had better coping skills."

The women in the study had managed most of the changes by themselves. There was a brief support phase after the 10-week study was over, but then the women had no contact with the researchers for 16 months.

Before the study began, says Horwath, the women taking part probably knew more about the kilojoule content of foods than the researchers did. They had all the information they needed to live a healthy life, but other things were getting in the way – stress, uncomfortable feelings and old patterns of behaviour.

Horwath says many studies have drawn links between body weight, stress and uncomfortable emotions. A US women's health study, for example, found that women who suffered from higher levels of psychological distress had more trouble sticking to a low-fat diet. Studies have also found that anger and depression can trigger weight gain.

The non-dieting approach adopted in Horwath's study was based on the work of Dr Rick Kausman, a medical doctor who has pioneered the non-dieting philosophy in Australia. In his book *If Not Dieting, Then What?*, Kausman says depriving ourselves of food slows down the metabolism, increases our desire to eat and gives us less energy for exercise. It can also make us feel emotionally deprived, as food plays such a key role in social situations.

Eventually, we rebel against our own rules. We feel guilty about our hoggishness, eat more to comfort ourselves and eventually go back on another diet. The result: a cycle of on-again, off-again diet-

ing that sabotages any attempts to lead a healthy life.

In his book, Kausman refers to a description by Janet Polivy, professor of psychology and psychiatry at Toronto University, of a classic experiment into starvation carried out in Minnesota in 1944. Thirty-two men were starved for six months before being re-introduced to unlimited eating over three months. During the period of starvation, the men in the study:

- were obsessed with food, which became their main topic of conversation;
- collected recipes and studied cookbooks and menus;
- hung up pictures of food, even substituting them for pictures of women; and
- became more irritable and lethargic, and lost their sex drive.

Dieters tend to eat more of foods they consider "bad" because they plan to spurn them entirely when they're being "good" tomorrow.

Before the study, the men were normal, healthy eaters; afterwards, they were obsessed with food, gorged themselves and felt their eating was out of control. Some even stole food.

Deprivation, says Kausman, is not the solution to weight gain. The word "diet" was once used to describe a way of eating; now, it's a way of not eating.

He urges people to forget about setting a goal weight. Instead, he suggests, they should figure out why they find it so hard to maintain a healthy weight, and then make sustainable behavioural changes that enable them to maintain a comfort-

able weight without feeling deprived of food or having a reduced quality of life.

Cutting up celery and carrot sticks and putting them in the fridge to have as snacks might be an achievable behavioural change, says Kausman, but it's unlikely to be a sustainable one. Most people don't want to snack on carrots and celery every day, any more than they want to get up at 5.30am to swim 40 laps of the local pool every day before work. Goals should be realistic, and should start small.

The three key concepts of Kausman's book are: there is no such thing as a "good" food or a "bad" food; it's natural to eat less of the foods you enjoy the taste of now, because you know it's okay to have them another time; and try to eat slowly and enjoy your food. The second of these concepts is based on the idea that dieters tend to eat more of the foods they consider "bad" because they plan to spurn them entirely when they're being "good" tomorrow.

Other elements in Kausman's approach include being more aware of the way you eat – particularly in regard to eating when you're not hungry – and improving your body image.

Women who are struggling with their weight, says Horwath, do more non-hungry eating than other women. "After the age of 40 is the time when women really start gaining weight. I'm interested in how women listen to their bodies. The focus of the non-dieting approach is on health rather than body weight, and on the need to listen to your body signals. Am I full? Am I hungry? How hungry am I? And if I feel the urge to eat, is it because I'm hungry or because I'm bored or upset?"

"It's also about looking at all the emotions and thoughts that are going on around food. If you're upset or tired and need a reward, perhaps you can find a way to reward yourself that doesn't involve food."

In the future, Horwath hopes to study a random sample of women from around New Zealand to see which factors can be used to predict future weight gain. In her private practice in Dunedin, she also plans to run workshops offering a combination of the non-dieting approach and Harvard's relaxation techniques.

Adding relaxation techniques to the non-dieting approach gave women another tool to help them break free from chronic dieting patterns, says Horwath. As one woman in the study told the researchers, "Now I go and get my relaxation tape instead of going to the fridge." ■



Relaxation for weight control: study

By JOHN GIBB

INTENSIVE training in relaxation techniques has contributed to positive health results in a group of overweight Dunedin women, University of Otago researchers have shown.

This study was the first randomised trial to evaluate the effects of such training in a lifestyle change programme for overweight women, study co-author Dr Caroline Horwath, a senior lecturer in the university human nutrition department, said.

"The positive results are exciting, given the limited long-term success of traditional dieting approaches," Dr Horwath said.

"Deprivation of food makes people more focused on food."

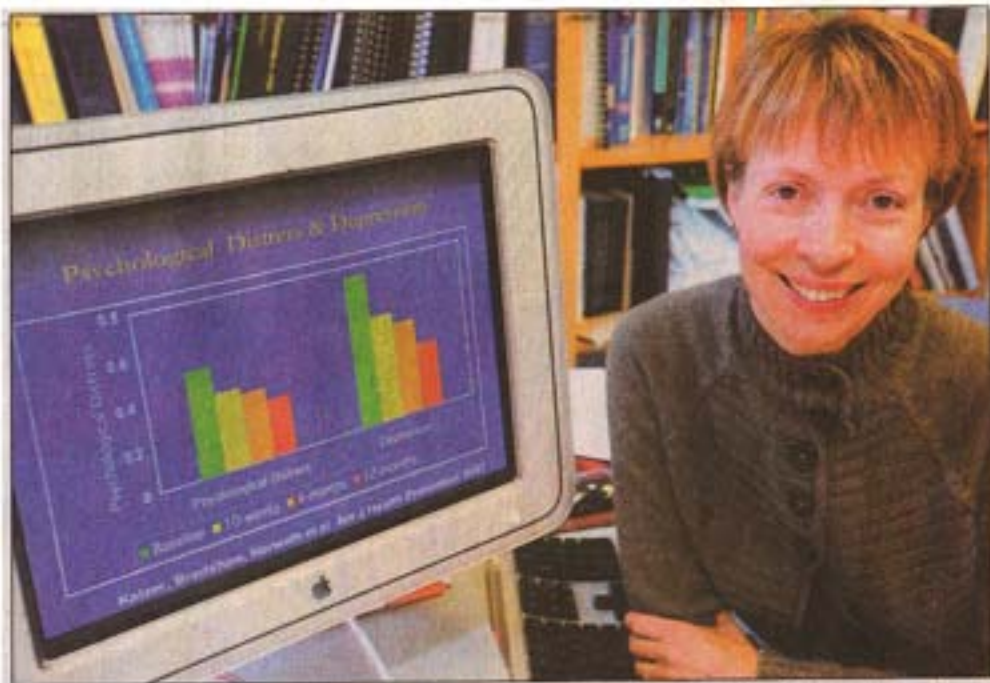
If the level of psychological distress could be reduced among some overweight and obese women, it was "easier to follow a healthier eating pattern," she said.

The latest findings were from a two-year follow-up of a ground-breaking Otago research project into the effectiveness of non-dieting intervention programmes in improving lifestyle behaviours and reducing psychological distress and medical symptoms.

In the study, 225 women with a body mass index (BMI) of 28 or more were randomly assigned to one of three intervention programmes.

All three 10-week-long programmes helped women in moving their focus away from calorie counting and body weight, towards sustainable lifestyle changes that enhanced their well-being, regardless of weight loss.

Such non-dieting interventions had longer-lasting effects if they included relaxation training, the study, recently published in US journal *Preventive Medicine*, found.



Positive results . . . University of Otago researcher Dr Caroline Horwath who is looking into the effectiveness of non-dieting intervention programmes. PHOTO: CRAIG BAXTER

The training also contributed to reduced insomnia and "very substantial reductions in depression".

Despite giving up dieting, women in all three interventions had success-

medical symptom improvements they had shown after the first year.

Women who were still regularly practising these techniques after two years had also lost an average 2.5kg in weight.

"Stress and negative emotions can trigger women to overeat and consume high-fat and high-sugar foods."

By using relaxation techniques, such as progressive muscle relaxation, and abdominal breathing, women had effective tools to manage stress and emotions without resorting to unhealthy eating, she said.

These techniques were adapted from a Harvard Mind-Body Medical Institute programme.

“Stress and negative emotions can trigger women to overeat and consume high-fat and high-sugar foods”

fully prevented any weight gain over the two-year period, which was a promising outcome for a group at high risk of weight gain over time, she said.

After two years, only the women who had received the training had maintained the psychological and