

Swamped by your appetite?

Is your personality making you fat?

Being spontaneous may make you the life of the party, but is your exuberant personality also the reason you're overweight? Nutritionist Kathleen Alleaume investigates

In order to see if particular personality traits could be linked to obesity, a recent research study at Washington University measured the personality of 264 lean and 56 obese people (using a Temperament and Character Inventory – or TCI). The study also psych-tested 183 obese individuals enrolled in a 22-week weight management program that involved weekly group and diet-education sessions.

What did they find?

An inherent desire to seek out things that are new and unusual – or novelty seeking – could be the reason you're overweight. Compared with lean subjects, obese subjects in the study scored higher in novelty seeking, lower in persistence and lower in self-directedness. In other words, overweight folk in this study were not fond of routine and were less adept at goal setting and sticking things out to the end.

Conversely, the obese subjects who succeeded in the weight management program (weight loss of at least 10%) scored lower on novelty seeking than those in the same program who failed to lose that much weight.

So how do these personality traits translate to obesity? The researchers in this study suggested that these high novelty-seeking scores were indicative of a strong appetite drive – a factor that will inhibit any attempt to shed kilos. Similarly, a difficulty in setting and pursuing goals (vital elements to see through lifestyle changes) was linked to low self-directedness scores.

Essentially these results suggest that certain personality traits could contribute to obesity. It confirms what we all already know – that the mental and emotional aspect is as important to weight loss as food and exercise. The good news is that it's nothing we can't change – weight-loss programs which target these inherent behaviours will help make a difference.

Other research into disordered eating behaviour reveals some of these personality characteristics:

● Lack of self-worth

People who lack self-worth and regard themselves as failures often give up the struggle to lose weight. Common refrains such as, 'I won't be able to lose weight', is

a typical way of thinking. Positive self-talk and affirmations are proven tools for enhancing success and challenging negative thoughts. Instead of thinking, 'I will never be slim again', try thinking, 'Today I have succeeded in losing some excess fat', or, 'I look slimmer'. These kind of statements lead to positive and fruitful results.

● Lack of self-control

Many obese people report they have an absolute lack of self-control when exposed to the temptation of immediate gratification from food. Others say they are not disciplined when it comes to exercising regularly. If this is you, try using affirmations to reward instances when you show self-control. For example, 'I will put the left over food away' or 'I will schedule in three exercise sessions this week'. This type of positive self-talk makes you conscientiousness and facilitates task- and goal-directed behaviours, such as thinking before acting (Am I really hungry or just bored?), delaying gratification, following rules and planning, organising and prioritising tasks – all key behaviours for weight-loss success.

● Emotional lability

Research shows that overweight people are more emotionally reactive and more likely to overeat when distressed, than those of normal weight. For a number of people, overeating stems from anxiety – if you find yourself consuming an entire bag of potato chips, it's possible that you're trying to divert yourself from feeling anxious. In other cases, overeating may be the result of depression – if you feel tired, hopeless and have lost interest in your normal activities, you may be suffering from a depressive episode. In order to deal with these uncomfortable feelings, people may turn to food in an effort to cheer up. The problem is that the food can lead to weight gain, which in turn can exacerbate the depression cycle. In either case, it is important to realise that this represents a dependence on external factors for emotional satisfaction and shows a need to wean yourself off this dependence.



Angry eating is bad news

6 weight-loss tips that always work... for EVERY personality

Top heavy

The cornerstone of weight control is between your ears – that is, how you talk to yourself.

It is important to 'tune in' and recognise your patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving in relation to weight and identify the unhelpful patterns which are maintaining your current weight problems.

Understand your motivation

The more you understand what makes you tick, the easier it will be to manage your food intake and daily activity.

Find out what's eating you?

All too often overeating is triggered by stress, boredom, loneliness, anger, depression and other emotions. Learning to deal with emotions without food is a significant skill that will help long-term weight control.

Plan success!

Your old habits may be so ingrained that you practise them without thinking. Your new habits need a chance to become as automatic as your old habits. Know your triggers and anticipate them, then make a plan to help you stay on track.

Accept imperfection

Setbacks are a natural part of behaviour change. When you have a setback, instead of giving up entirely, simply start afresh the next day. Remember that you're planning to change your life and that healthy weight loss comes slow and steady. Changes won't happen all at once, but the results will be worth it – and permanent!

Keep a food diary

We'll say it once and keep saying it! This powerful tool forces you to recognise exactly what you're eating each day. It is also one of the habits of successful losers who have lost the weight and kept it off. The trick is to adopt a form of recording that works for you.