

# *What* **PSYCHOLOGISTS** *wish you knew about* **WEIGHT LOSS**



If you're struggling to lose weight, you could be missing one crucial element – the role your mind plays. Beverley Hadgraft explains



**D**iets not only fail 95 per cent of the time, they can also lead to poor health and low self-esteem. But there is a weight-loss solution that can make a real difference. By focusing on your mind, you can change your behaviour. Here, three psychologists share their approaches to losing weight and keeping it off!



**CAROL ROLSTON** is a clinical psychologist from Perth who supports morbidly obese people (with a BMI of over 40) considering bariatric surgery.

### **STAY AWAY FROM THE SCALES**

When the number on the scales goes down we feel great, but if it's gone up or not shifted we can feel like a failure. Bathroom scales are a tool and should be used as such. If you must check your weight do it no more than once a week and treat the numbers as data to calculate the cause of any changes.

Instead of relying on scales, set lifestyle goals, such as planning a hiking holiday. You can begin collecting travel brochures, start saving for the trip, research hiking gear and go for training walks.

### **DO A RELATIONSHIPS CHECK**

One of the best aids to getting and staying healthy is a supportive partner. It's important to communicate your health plans using 'I' language. Try saying, 'This is something I value. I don't want to be a burden on my family.'

Explain to your partner how he can help in terms of meal planning, exercise or even swapping social outings such as dinners out for walks or fitness classes. If communication is an issue or

your partner feels threatened, counselling can help.

### **ASK YOURSELF WHAT PURPOSE YOUR WEIGHT SERVES**

Some people use weight as an excuse not to make social forays or achieve in other areas of their life. Others may have been physically, sexually or emotionally abused and believe, even subconsciously, that their weight protects them from future interactions.

A psychologist or counsellor can teach you the skills to help you manage those issues more appropriately.

### **RECOGNISE EMOTIONAL EATING**

People often seek out sweet comforting foods when bored or unhappy. But such moods usually pass in about 20 minutes so practise 'surfing' the mood, knowing it will pass. Distract yourself with a pleasurable activity that captures your attention – talk to a friend or do something active.

If the emotional eating is caused by stress, try a calming breathing exercise: inhale for a count of four, hold for two and breathe out for six. ►



**LOUISE ADAMS** is a clinical psychologist in Sydney, and founder of *Treat Yourself Well*, a non-dieting health and wellness program.

## LEARN THE ART OF CRITICAL THINKING

Don't accept every blanket statement about diet, exercise and weight loss as fact. Research it to see what the science shows. Learn how exercise and good nutrition benefit the body. When you're well informed, you're more likely to focus on behaviours that improve health permanently.

## CHANGE THE LANGUAGE AROUND EXERCISE

Most people want to move their body in a way that is enjoyable and fun, yet workouts are often described using words such as 'punishing' or 'whipped into shape'. Consider your values and find a workout that fits. If you like the energy of lots of people around you, choose a group fitness class; if you enjoy solitude, go running or swimming; if you prefer team sports, try softball or tennis. You should feel disappointed if you miss a session, not guilty.

## PRACTISE MINDFUL EATING

Try this exercise: take three different foods, for example, a strawberry, cheese and a chocolate bar. Observe, touch and smell each item, noticing whether it sets your salivary glands working. While chewing, notice how the texture changes in your mouth. Notice how you feel when you swallow it. People often find that junk foods eaten mindfully rather than guiltily are not as nice as they thought. Eating slowly also makes us feel satisfied with less.

## EACH DAY FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN DO TO LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

Instead of putting weight loss in the spotlight, look at what else is on stage such as self-care, healthy living and stress management.

## PRACTISE SELF-COMPASSION

Notice when you're being mean or judging yourself. When people practise self-kindness their health behaviours improve long term. They have a binge, accept that everyone slips up occasionally and get back on the wagon.



**GLENN MACKINTOSH** is the principal psychologist with *Weight Management Psychology* in Brisbane.

## TRY A BODY SCAN

Often people eat healthily and exercise regularly but see no weight changes and get discouraged. Having a DEXA scan – a low level X-ray that gives an accurate reading of lean tissue, bone mineral density and body fat percentage – every two to three months can show that unhealthy fat is being replaced by healthy muscle and bone and provide an incentive to continue healthy behaviours.

## USE HYPNOSIS WHILE EXERCISING

Some studies have shown that people exercising on a treadmill or stationary bike have the same openness to hypnotic suggestion as they would on a therapist's couch. That means they are more susceptible to new ideas and making subconscious changes, leading to better behaviours, whether that be eating or drinking habits or exercise.

You can learn self-hypnosis techniques from hypnotherapists, or there are special apps that can help. Try the *Walking Companion* download, which is available from [weightmanagementpsychology.com.au](http://weightmanagementpsychology.com.au) for \$US45.

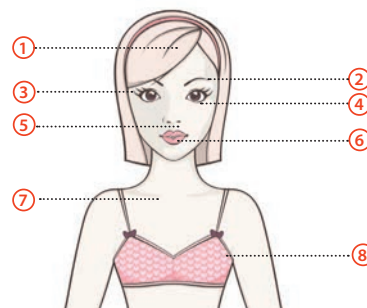
## IDENTIFY AND ELIMINATE POOR EATING BEHAVIOURS

One way of tackling food cravings is with Emotional Freedom

Techniques (EFT), also known as 'psychological acupuncture'. When we're exposed to a food we crave, such as chocolate, it excites the reward and pleasure centre of the brain. EFT involves exposing yourself to that food then tapping specific acupuncture points. This calms the brain and causes the desire to go away. Eventually this effect should be permanent.

See a psychologist to learn the technique or try tapping the points shown on the diagram below, starting at the top and working down, with the index and middle fingertips. Use a solid tap and each time you tap repeat a positive affirmation three times: 'Even though I have this craving for (food name) I love and accept myself anyway.'

A food craving and tapping app is available from [tapintoabetteryou.com](http://tapintoabetteryou.com), \$4.99.



1. Top (centre) of head
2. Eyebrow
3. Side of eye
4. Under eye
5. Under nose
6. Chin (under lips)
7. Collarbone
8. Under arm