QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY IN A WEIGHT LOSS PROGRAM: CONTRIBUTION TO SELF-EFFICACY AND LOCUS OF CONTROL

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how spirituality affects intrapersonal characteristics associated with a weight loss program.

Design: A series of 5 focus group interviews was conducted with women who were past participants of the Weigh Down Workshop, a spiritually based weight loss program.

Setting: Three churches in the Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota, metropolitan area.

Participants: Focus group participants (N = 32) were white, fairly well educated, with moderate income levels. Their mean age was 50 years.

Phenomena of Interest: Behavior changes, factors affecting self-efficacy for performing the behaviors, and locus of control.

Analysis: Sessions were audiotaped and transcribed. Transcribed text was coded and analyzed using qualitative data analysis procedures.

Results: Major changes in self-reported eating behaviors included eating only when experiencing true physiological hunger and stopping when sensing a feeling of fullness. Self-efficacy for these behaviors was reported to be enhanced by observing weight loss for themselves or others. Support from other group members, the simplicity of the program, and spiritual benefits through prayer and scripture reading were also reported to enhance confidence. Women indicated that they relied on an internal locus of control based on a sense of self-discipline.

Conclusions and Implications: Traditional means to enhance self-efficacy were important for all women; however, for some women, spirituality was also an important aspect of adhering to program principles.

KEY WORDS: locus of control, self-efficacy, spirituality, weight loss program

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of overweight in women in the United States between the ages of 20 and 39 and 40 and 59 was estimated to be 54% and 66%, respectively, based on National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) 1999-2000 data. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System data collected via a telephone survey in 2000 showed that 45% of overweight and 66% of obese adult respondents indicated that they were trying to lose weight. Given the prevalence of overweight and intention to lose weight, there has been substantial interest in commercial weight loss programs. Many of these programs differ in their central components. In a recent survey, overweight and obese adults identified important factors about weight loss programs that they would like information about when looking for a weight loss plan. These included cost, prescribed diet, safety, typical weight loss, and behavior modification.

When consumers decide to participate in a weight loss program, the suitability of the program to their needs becomes important. Some consumers have chosen to participate in programs that include spirituality as a central component. Founded in 1960, Overeaters Anonymous is a well-known example of a program that involves spirituality in the context of following a 12-step program patterned after that of Alcoholics Anonymous to address compulsive overeating. Two additional weight loss programs based on spirituality include the Thin Within Program and the Weigh Down Workshop. The Thin Within Program was founded in 1975 and publicizes itself as a spiritually based, 12-week program that teaches participants to listen to their body’s natural internal hunger/fullness signals. The Weigh Down Work-
shop is a newer program founded in 1986 by a registered
dietitian that takes a similar approach to weight loss.8 In
2001, it was estimated that there were nearly 30,000 Weigh
Down Workshop groups nationwide, with many offered
through churches.9

Several intrapersonal characteristics based on common
behavioral theories have been suggested to be important in
weight management, including self-efficacy (individuals’
judgment of their ability to perform a behavior successfully)
and locus of control (individuals’ view of whether attain-
ment of a goal is within their control or determined outside
their control).10,11 Recent studies and reviews have reported
an association between self-efficacy and locus of control and
successful weight loss or maintenance of weight loss over
time.11-13 This suggests that self-efficacy and locus of control
should be addressed as components of weight loss success
and prevention of relapse in weight management programs.
Self-efficacy can be enhanced through performance accom-
mplishments, vicarious experiences by observing others, and
verbal persuasion.14 Several experimental and clinical weight
loss programs have been evaluated in regard to effects on
self-efficacy and locus of control using quantitative mea-
sures.11-13 However, there is no information available about
how spiritually based weight loss programs may affect these
characteristics. Qualitative analysis can be used to explore
the manner by which the spiritual aspect of these programs
contributes to self-efficacy and locus of control in relation to
weight loss practices.

A recent analysis of the relationship between religious
involvement and health outcomes showed that there was lit-
tle empirical evidence to support a relationship.15 Another
study defined optimal health as a balance of physical, emo-
tional, social, spiritual, and intellectual health.16 Spiritually
based weight loss programs take advantage of an already pre-
ranged to the participants for home use.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

Women who had recently participated in the Weigh Down
Workshop program were recruited to participate in a focus
group interview. The Weigh Down Workshop program is
represented as a spiritually rooted and biblically based pro-
gram that promotes regular bible study and frequent prayer
to achieve successful weight loss results.8 Participants are
taught to recognize feelings of true physiological hunger and
to eat regular food with control. The program consists of 12
weekly meetings led by a volunteer facilitator that usually
take place in church meeting rooms. Participants view inspi-

rational/instructional videotapes, and time is allotted for dis-
cussion and sharing. Audiotapes and workbooks are also dis-
tributed to the participants for home use.

Letters were mailed by group leaders to former partici-
pants of the program inviting them to take part in a focus
group discussion. Five focus groups were conducted with a
range of 5 to 8 women attending each group discussion at 1
of 3 churches in the Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota, met-
ropolitan area. The sessions lasted 1 to 1.5 hours. The Uni-
versity of Minnesota Institutional Review Board approved
the study prior to data collection. The women received a $25
gift certificate in return for their participation.

A series of discussion questions were developed based on
guiding principles according to Krueger (Table 1).17 The
questions were written to address (1) the conceptualization of
the purpose of the focus groups, (2) the need to ask non-
leading, open-ended questions that would give the maxi-
imum amount of information, and (3) the need to allow for
the participant to reflect and provide feedback within the
context of their experience with the Weigh Down Work-
shop. The first question was asked to elicit information about
the extent of participation in the program (question 1). The
second question was asked to allow the participants to self-
report behavior changes that they had made as a result of
participation in the program (question 2). It was thought that
these behaviors needed to be identified by participants prior
to asking questions that pertained to perceived confidence in
their ability to perform the behaviors. Therefore, after the

Table 1. Focus Group Discussion Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. We would like to know more about your experiences with the Weigh Down Workshop. We will start by asking you to tell us when you first participated in the Weigh Down Workshop and how many series you have completed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. If you changed your eating habits as a result of participating in the Weigh Down Workshop, please describe these changes. (Probe for possible changes in meal and snack patterns, types of foods consumed, food purchasing and preparation, eating at restaurants.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Can you tell me how the Weigh Down Workshop might have affected your confidence in your ability to [insert behaviors listed in response to question 1]? (Probe about the strength of their confidence and whether confidence was greater related to different domains of behaviors related to weight loss practices.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. We have talked about the various changes you have made in eating behaviors to lose weight. I am interested in hearing more about how your participation in the Weigh Down Workshop has affected how you view your potential to make these changes. Please tell me about how the program has affected your beliefs about who or what controls whether you make these changes in your eating behavior. (Probe about self, fate/destiny, physician, family members, God.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Many weight loss programs promise specific outcomes. What outcomes did you expect from the Weigh Down Workshop?</td>
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<td>6. What outcomes did you realize from participation in the program?</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. What were some of the deterrents, problems, or concerns you may have had that kept you from realizing these outcomes?</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. If the program helped you overcome these problems, can you explain how?</td>
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