
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

(*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2004;36:13-19.)

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.¹ 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.² 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.³ 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.⁴ Two additional weight loss programs based on spirituality include the Thin Within Program⁵ and the Weigh Down Workshop.⁶ 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.⁷ The Weigh Down Work-

Funded by the University of Minnesota Agricultural Experiment Station.
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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 attainment 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 accomplishments, 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 measures.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 little empirical evidence to support a relationship.¹⁵ Another study defined optimal health as a balance of physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual health.¹⁶ Spiritually based weight loss programs take advantage of an already present faith to assist in behavior modification. The objective of this qualitative study was to determine how the cognitive variables of self-efficacy and locus of control are influenced by participation in a spiritually based weight loss program. There is a need for a better understanding of mediating mechanisms that affect the outcomes of weight loss programs for those individuals who choose to participate in these programs.

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 program 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-

ration/instructional videotapes, and time is allotted for discussion and sharing. Audiotapes and workbooks are also distributed to the participants for home use.

Letters were mailed by group leaders to former participants 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, metropolitan area. The sessions lasted 1 to 1.5 hours. The University 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 maximum 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 Workshop. 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

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| 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. |
| 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.) |
| 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.) |
| 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.) |
| 5. Many weight loss programs promise specific outcomes. What outcomes did you expect from the Weigh Down Workshop? |
| 6. What outcomes did you realize from participation in the program? |
| 7. What were some of the deterrents, problems, or concerns you may have had that kept you from realizing these outcomes? |
| 8. If the program helped you overcome these problems, can you explain how? |

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