

# Healthy Weight Maintenance: A Narrative Analysis of Weight Cycling in the Formerly Obese

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## Abstract

This study addressed weight cycling and sustained weight loss among 6 formerly obese weight cyclers. **Self-determination theory (SDT)** and **social cognitive theory (SCT)** provided theoretical frameworks. Findings revealed five overarching themes and that no single solution exists for successful sustained weight loss in this population.

## Problem

- Medical and economic costs for obesity estimated at \$147 billion per year.
- Less than 1/3 of overweight individuals successfully maintain weight loss.
- Dearth of literature for healthy sustained weight loss.

Missing is an understanding of the experiences of individuals who successfully maintained healthy weight loss, which could provide insights regarding effective psycho-social interventions.

Obesity has been treated as a **physical malfunction** or **“lack of will.”** Little emphasis has been placed on the mindset and psychological strength required to maintain a fairly regimented lifestyle for successful outcomes.

## Purpose

Explore key events and experiences in the lives of former weight cyclers who had lost 20% or more of their weight at least 2 times and maintained healthy weight maintenance for at least two years.

## Relevant Literature

There is a lack of literature exploring this phenomenon.

Theoretical frameworks associated with behavior change related to health behaviors (e.g., smoking cessation, weight loss) were used.

Relevant concepts: **autonomy, mastery, relatedness, and vicarious learning.**

There is a dearth of existing research for this phenomenon. Research has focused on discrete weight loss interventions such as:

- behavior modification programs
- pharmaceutical approaches
- proprietary/medical programs
- surgery
- commercial weight loss programs

The only intervention providing data for long term success is surgical with **best reported outcomes at 30% experiencing sustained weight loss.**

## Research Questions

What do the narratives of formerly obese weight cyclers tell us about overcoming barriers to healthy weight maintenance?

The following sub questions were also explored:

- **How does the narrative start?**
- **What are the turning points in the journey?**
- **What is the meaning of repeated efforts?**
- **How is the self or identity described?**
- **What are the meaningful sources of support?**
- **What is the present moment of the narrative?**

## Procedures

Six applicants responded and met criteria for the study. The semi-structured interviews were conducted via face to face, video conference, or by phone, per participants' preference.

All interviews were audio recorded.

**Demographics:** 6 participants aged 45-72, 4 female, 2 male. All participants had been in long-term relationships (marriage), one widowed (P2), another divorced (P6). 5 of the 6 had children; 4 participants from the same family; all with higher education.

## Data Analysis

Identification and analysis of a priori codes and emergent codes resulted in identifying five major themes. Each theme was supported by subthemes.

Discrepant case: P5 did not fully meet criteria for the study, but her pattern was consistent with other participants.

## Findings

The five recurring themes were:

- **Structure**
- **Strategies (for maintaining food and exercise, for maintaining honesty with self)**
- **Autonomy/ownership of the program**
- **Relationship as support**
- **Identity as a fat person**

Findings support **SDT** and **SCT** as meaningful frameworks.

Additional elements emerged (**resilience, diverse orientations e.g. data, lifestyle, spiritual**) to the problem worthy of further study.

Findings can be used to place greater emphasis on psychological components such as **autonomy, mastery, and relatedness**, which are necessary for successful remission.

## Limitations

- **Size of the study**
- **Lack of response** by potential participants and potential referral sources
  - Possible lack of interest, time, or trust
- **Transferability**
  - Small sample size
  - Participants appeared to have a wealth of resources (higher income, education, etc.).

## Conclusions

The participants demonstrated that their health practices may be akin to the professional athlete's regimen and commitment for long term success.

**Rather than aiming for “normal” lifestyle, success may require extraordinary resilience, persistence, and commitment.**

This health condition requires a holistic assessment of the patients' lifestyle, skill set, resources, and psychological functioning.

Interventions promoting resiliency, autonomy, mastery, relatedness, and environmental resources would optimize the potential for successful sustained weight loss.

## Social Change Implications

Increased education may lead to more successful and cost effective treatments and may reduce the social stigma associated with this struggle.

With more efficacious treatment and reduced stigma, individuals may experience an improved quality of life and better health overall.

At the societal level, better outcomes may lead to lower financial burden on society due to the direct and indirect medical cost associated with this condition.

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