

The Role of Motivation in Weight Management: New Findings

We have made what we think is a major breakthrough in research on weight management, in our finding that there are two kinds of weight control motivation.

“Positive” motivation comes from the perception of the benefits of weight control and the pain from one’s current weight. “Negative” motivation comes from the perception that weight control involves a loss of pleasure and freedom, takes a great deal of effort, and has a low probability of success. These two kinds of motivation may play different roles in weight management at different time points.

For example, overweight people who have no intention and who are making no effort to lose weight will have a relatively low level of Positive motivation. Those with a high level of Positive motivation are more likely to have definite weight loss goals and intentions (e.g. to lose 10 pounds in the next month). Thus, Positive motivation may be an important determinant in the “initiation” of weight loss efforts. Positive motivation is what makes you want to do something.

On the other hand, the level of Negative motivation should be related to the strength and persistence of weight loss efforts. Someone with a low level of Negative motivation will be less frustrated and more satisfied with the process of weight control. Therefore, Negative motivation should be a good predictor of weight loss. Negative motivation is what makes you not want to do something.

This is what we have learned about Positive and Negative motivation in our recent analysis:

We found that the perceived benefits of weight control increase slightly over the first 5 weeks of treatment. At the same time, physical and psychological pain associated with weight decrease significantly. The net result is that Positive motivation stays about the same. Negative motivation decreased significantly over 5 weeks, with consistent decreases in feelings of “resentment,” “regret,” “doubt,” and “perceived effort.” The results for Positive and Negative motivation at Time 1 and Time 2 are presented in Figure 1.

The decrease in Negative motivation over 5 weeks was related to improvements in weight, eating habits (decrease in “uncontrolled eating”), depression and stress. However, we did not see any relationship between changes in Positive motivation and these other changes (see Table 1).

It seems that a key effect of treatment on motivation is to decrease Negative Motivation. Improvements in negative motivation are not only due to weight loss, but are primarily related to improvements in eating habits and emotional state. Weight loss treatment is not just about following a diet, but about improving psychological risk factors and maintaining a strong motivation.

How do we decrease Negative motivation? We learn to see the process of weight control in a more positive light. Instead of thinking about what you can't have, think about the advantages and pleasures associated with what you can have. If you come to value eating small portions of tasty and healthy food, then it won't seem like such a burden and there will be less negative thinking. Similarly, if you discover that exercise is fun and feels good your thoughts about exercise will be positive.

Motivation is an automatic emotional response (something that we feel) and in order to keep it strong, we have to work on our thoughts and perceptions. Daily, you should continue to think about the benefits of being at your healthy weight and making the right choices, and put a STOP to negative thoughts that are always unrealistic. Switch negative interpretations to positive ones, as follows: Instead of "It is too much of an effort to lose weight," think "it's too much effort to carry the extra weight". Instead of "I resent having to follow a diet and change my eating habits," think "I resent having to deprive myself of health, energy, youth, and a nice silhouette." Rather than thinking "I regret not having the food I love," think "I regret not being the human being I want to be".

Successful long-term weight management (losing the weight and keeping it off) is not just about trying to stick to a diet, but learning to think and feel in less negative and more positive ways. This can easily be accomplished with the therapy tools that you have available to you, which you only need to do for a few minutes per day.

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Figure 1 –

Table 1 – Correlations between change in motivation, Time, and change in psychological variables and BMI

	Variable (change T1-T2)	Change in Positive Motivation T1-T2	Change in Negative Motivation T1-T2
Female	# of days (Time 1-2)	-0.05	-0.04
	Negative Motivation	-0.09	
	Positive Motivation		
	Uncontrolled eating	0.04	0.53
	Depression	-0.02	0.40
	Perfectionism	-0.06	0.25
	Stress	0.06	0.36
	BMI	0.04	0.21
Male	# of days (Time 1-2)	-0.02	-0.03
	Negative Motivation	0.03	
	Positive Motivation		
	Uncontrolled eating	0.09	0.48
	Depression	0.05	0.37
	Perfectionism	-0.07	0.16
	Stress	-0.03	0.37
	BMI	0.05	0.28