



Can You Psych Yourself Slim?

Portion-control plates. The Weight Watchers point system. New 100-calorie snack packs on grocery store shelves.

The battle to fight weight gain, once waged primarily on dinner tables and treadmills, has entered a new era: psychological warfare. The mission: to usher in strategies that tilt the battleground, however slightly, in the favor of those hoping to adopt healthier patterns of eating.

In the latest salvo, universities including Harvard and William and Mary have begun instituting "no tray" policies in their dining halls. In addition to cutting down on environmental waste — and the cost of wasted food — proponents of the move say it will help students make healthier choice when it comes to portion sizes.

"[T]his reduction in consumption could have an effect on individual student health: Not only will students be forced to stand up and walk to the kitchen when they're still hungry, but they're likely to avoid the excessive eating that trays so frequently encourage," reads an editorial in the Feb. 5 issue of *The Crimson*, Harvard's student newspaper.

The strategy is not without its opponents; some students feel it causes more inconvenience than it is worth.

But diet experts say taking away the trays can translate into a successful portion control strategy that can help many to control their caloric intake.

"Most people live by the 'Field of Dreams' philosophy when it comes to eating — if it is there, we will eat it"

"Eliminating cafeteria trays forces people to use one plate and one hand and that might limit portions or choices," Kavanagh said. "I have always encouraged my clients to use smaller plates, to eat from a small bowl rather than a large container."

"The tricks really do work; so much eating is simply unconsciously finishing what was placed on the plate."

The Psychological Side of Eating

"Behavioral modification has been a mainstay for weight loss for decades ever since B. F. Skinner conceptualized it," said Dr. Charles Clark, associate dean and professor of medicine at Indiana University School of Medicine.

As an example, Clark cites a 1993 study in the journal *Annals of Internal Medicine* titled "Evidence for Success of Behavior Modification in Weight Loss and Control." In this study, researchers from Baylor



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met.

What the researchers found was that when combined with a low-calorie diet, these strategies helped obese participants lose weight — and nearly a third of them kept the weight off for years afterward, compared to only 5 percent of those who stuck to a low-calorie diet without adopting these healthy habits.

And psychological warfare against weight gain may indeed be needed to counter some of the existing cues in our environment that encourage us to eat more, says Dr. Darwin Deen, nutrition expert and professor of family and social medicine at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York.

"We are being psyched all the time by advertising designed to change what and how much we eat," he said. "When we eat in restaurants, we are often given portions that are unreasonably large. Aren't we then psyching ourselves fat?"

"I don't think you can really 'fool' yourself, but any way that you can support your resolve to eat more sensibly/healthier is smart to do."

Carla Wolper, a nutritionist at the Obesity Research Center at St. Luke's Hospital in New York, agrees.

"In all of life, not just in regard to nutrition, humans are often devising methods to encourage certain behaviors. Eating behavior is no different," she said. "People are drawn to palatable food and know the reward of good taste and unconsciously, the ultimate reward of dopamine release in the brain."

"That is why it is so hard to talk yourself out of eating particular foods that are important to you — you know you are denying yourself dopamine."

Behavioral Modification No Magic Bullet

< p> Despite the advantage that these tips and tricks can bestow upon those who wish to control

"These are all tools but only that," said Keith Ayoob, pediatric nutritionist and associate professor at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. "People aren't stupid; they know what's happening. These things just make it a little easier to comply with a healthier eating style."

"This 'psyching oneself out' can be a good way to jump-start, but eventually you have to address the main issue: You need to eat differently and do so permanently."

"You can't truly 'fool' yourself into losing weight," said Jackie Newgent, a nutritionist and cookbook author. "What some people might think of as tricks, actually are solid behavior modification techniques, such as using portion-control plates."

Other Ways to Psych Yourself Slimmer

The possible tools that those hoping to achieve a healthier diet have at their disposal go beyond losing the tray, of course. Dr. Beverly Green of the Center for Health Studies in Seattle says the concept of volumetrics — ensuring that foods that are consumed have a high water content — may help people feel full while keeping actual caloric intake to a minimum.

Heidi Skolnik, nutritionist at The Women's Sports Medicine Center at Hospital for Special Surgery in



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in the buffet line before selecting any dishes — allow for a more mindful approach when it comes to enjoying food.

Such an approach has proven helpful for many, notes Dr. David Katz, director and co-founder of the Yale Prevention Research Center.

"There is a whole movement devoted to 'mindful' eating, based on the notion that less food is eaten when the food you do eat gets more attention," he said. "The goal here is to phase out inattentive eating."

"And of course, 'gimmicks,' such as Weight Watchers points are all about creating mindful, or attentive, eating."



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