

# Obesity and Behavior

---

**There should be more to a dieting program than calories and exercise. Behaviorists say you have to look around you for clues to your condition. Consider the chastity-belt theory of fatness, for instance.**

---

by Robert J. Trotter

Chastity belts are no longer in vogue, but some insecure husbands may have come up with an equally cruel method of trying to keep their wives from fooling around. Psychologist Richard B. Stuart of the University of Michigan has found that husbands sometimes encourage their wives to overeat and gain weight in order to keep the wives unattractive and, supposedly, faithful.

Stuart, a behaviorist, worked for many months with married women who seemed to be unable to lose weight. Stuart suspected that the husbands might be at least partially responsible for the overeating so he asked the couples to make tape recordings of their dinner conversations. Stuart found, among other things, that the husbands were four times more likely to offer food to their wives than the other way around—even though the husbands knew that their wives were on a diet.

Stuart then interviewed 55 men who were married to women who were trying to lose weight. He found that many husbands seem to enjoy demonstrating what they consider to be their masculine power by coaxing or forcing their wives to become fat. In addition, Stuart found out that some husbands used their wives' fatness to win arguments. A husband can usually get the final word in an argument by calling his wife a "fat slob." If the wives were successful in losing weight the husbands felt (perhaps unconsciously) that they would not win as many arguments.

In addition to using fatness to win arguments and to keep wives faithful, Stuart found that some husbands who were no longer sexually attracted to their wives used fatness as an excuse for lack of sexual desire. In most cases, the husbands lost their desire first and then started to fatten up their wives.

The chastity-belt theory of weight gain is one point that J. V. McConnell of the University of Michigan brings up when he talks about weight control. McConnell feels that the environment, including the people in the environment, is a major factor in obesity. Mc-

Connell and Chauncey Smith have recently opened a private behavioral clinic in Ann Arbor. They call it the Institute for Behavior Change, and obesity is one of the problems treated there.

Like almost every human behavior, says McConnell, eating behavior is multidetermined. People eat for many reasons, not just because they have been without food for a while. People eat because their blood-sugar level has fallen, because brain mechanisms urge them to eat, because their stomachs are contracting, their dinner time is approaching or because they have just seen or smelled or heard about something good to eat. And there are other reasons. People eat because their parents thought that fat babies are healthy babies and because food and eating have a variety of symbolic and social values. Obviously, says McConnell, any dieting program must take into account not just calories and exercise. Motives, mannerisms and environmental factors must be considered as well.

While most purely medical approaches to weight loss yield a success rate of about 10 percent, McConnell and Smith claim that their behavioral clinic has a success rate of better than 70 percent. For people who do not have a severe weight problem, a clinic may not be necessary. The behaviorists suggest the following:

- Begin by recording everything you eat for a week or two. Take note of where you eat, the events (and thoughts) that occur just before and after you eat and record who is around you when you eat and what their response is to your food intake.

- Write down all of the rewards and punishments that will come to you if you gain better control over your eating behavior.

- Break your eating habits by changing mealtimes to a very irregular schedule several weeks before you go on a diet.

- Any weight-control program will probably be more efficient if you in-

crease your physical activity to burn off excess fat. If you are not particularly athletic, think about what forms of physical activity you like best and try to arrange to get more of this kind of exercise.

- Involve as many people as possible in your program. If someone close to you consciously or unconsciously wants you to remain fat, try to think of substitute rewards that will encourage that person to help you lose weight. You may even have to offer people money or services for every pound they help you lose.

- When you start the program make a chart or graph on which you record your daily weight and each aspect of your daily routine, including the amount of food eaten and exercise taken. Post the graph in a prominent place so that everyone can see your progress and comment on it. Arrange to have someone give you regular rewards (money, privileges, a verbal pat on the back) each time you meet your daily goal. Such a graph, says McConnell, may be the most important part of any weight-control program because it provides immediate feedback.

- Don't expect too much too soon or set unrealistic goals. The average weight loss is about a pound a week. Long-term weight loss is difficult for most people to achieve because so many factors are involved. But success is encouraging, so make sure that the first goals—the first few days' changes in behavior—are easy to achieve.

Not everyone, of course, can lose weight on their own by the behavioral method. Some people may have to seek the help of a psychologist and a physician to make sure that symbolic as well as physical needs are accounted for in the weight-loss program. And, warns McConnell, about five percent of all weight problems (underweight as well as overweight) in the United States are the result of a physically malfunctioning body. Therefore, any weight-control program should begin with a physical checkup. □