Diet drugs: More hindrance than help?
Losing just half a pound a week can be agonizingly slow for someone dozens of pounds overweight, but results of a recent study indicate that behavioral therapy that leads to slow but sure weight reduction by modifying eating habits keeps pounds off longer than a faster-acting weight reducing drug.

"At this point, behavioral therapy is still the treatment of choice," says Linda Wilcoxon Craighead of Pennsylvania State University. Craighead and colleagues tested four methods of losing weight in their study of 120 women, reported in the July Archives of General Psychiatry. The six-month treatment programs for the women, who were 63 percent overweight on the average, included: a simple prescription of the relatively mild diet drug "pondimin"; a regimen of the drug and supportive group therapy; a treatment combining behavior modification with drug therapy; and behavior modification alone.

Although initially women in the drug treatment groups lost more weight than those in behavioral therapy, a follow-up one year later showed "a striking reversal in the relative efficacy of the treatments." Women who had depended on the appetite suppressor to curb their hunger pangs regained, on the average, 63 percent of the weight they had lost, while those who had relied on behavioral techniques alone regained only 17 percent. Learning techniques to lose weight, such as keeping a food diary and putting the fork down between bites, gave patients in the behavior modification group a structured regime to fall back on once the treatment stopped, the researchers suggest, in contrast to those in drug therapy who were forced to rely on willpower to keep unwanted pounds from reappearing.

Sex and altruism
The sugar and spice view that little girls are more helpful than little boys falls apart if one compares classroom behavior of the sexes, suggest researchers at the University of Utah. Carol C. Shigetomi, Donald P. Hartmann and Donna M. Gelfand first asked 279 fifth and sixth graders and their teachers to rate privately other class members' willingness to share or "do things to make others feel good." Though the survey showed girls in the class had far greater reputations for altruism than did boys, the psychologists found no strong sex differences in tasks they used to test the children's willingness to share time and resources.

The discrepancy between reputation and behavior described in the July Developmental Psychology replicates results of a similar study published in 1981. Although the source of the long-lived discrepancy remains to be determined, the researchers suggest that "girls' greater verbal fluency and their readiness to express empathy with those in distress may lead others to overestimate their helpful behavior."

Stress promotes accidents and errors
Underscoring evidence that stressful events increase one's vulnerability to illness (SN: 5/24/80, p. 335) and even sudden death (SN: 7/25/88, p. 54), a pilot study from Massachusetts General Hospital suggests that clusters of stressful events can affect subsequent rates of everyday accidents and errors. By tallying both positive and negative "challenging events" (ranging from illness or injury to the birth of a grandchild) in the lives of 31 student nurses, David V. Sheehan and colleagues were able to predict which nurses were most likely to suffer from a rash of physical accidents and job-related errors in the following weeks. "Accidents and errors" ranged from muscle strains and "dropping or spilling things" to automobile mishaps and major errors in judgment, according to the study, published in Psychiatry in Medicine (Volume 11, Number 2).

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