

# Psychology of food choice: Challenging the status quo

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Researchers are challenging conventional beliefs about the effectiveness of traditional strategies for encouraging healthy eating. The symposium, "Challenging Misconceptions About the Psychology of Food Choice," includes four presentations that tackle issues such as the harmfulness of weight-stigma, encouraging healthy choices, and strategies to help children and teens. The symposium is featured at the SPSP 16th Annual Convention in Long Beach, California.

## Helping kids eat more vegetables

A [study](#), published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, observed whether or not photographs of vegetables on a school lunch tray had an impact on the amount of vegetables eaten. The study found that placing photos of carrots and green beans did increase the amounts of vegetables eaten during lunch, but it still was not at levels consistent with government-recommended dietary guidelines.

Researchers at the University of Minnesota are now studying other simple methods that schools could utilize to encourage eating vegetables during lunch. Their research will be published in the coming year.

"[Our] research suggests that little changes to the lunchroom setting can help kids eat more vegetables. For example, you can help kids eat more vegetables by providing vegetables before you offer any other [food](#)," explains researcher Traci Mann. Children who were given vegetables to

eat first before any other food ate more than children who were provided all food options at once.

## **Challenging teens' attitudes**

Researchers at the University of California at San Diego and the University of Texas at Austin are investigating ways to motivate teenagers to make healthier food and drink choices.

"Teenagers are notoriously uninterested in [healthy eating](#)," says lead researcher Christopher Bryan. In response to that disinterest, Bryan and his colleagues have taken a novel approach at motivating teens. "Instead of trying to convince teens to care about something they don't care about, we link healthy eating to things they already care about," Bryan explains.

The researchers are framing the intervention as an expose of deceptive food marketing practices designed to manipulate teens to eat junk food, for instance, explaining how companies engineer junk food to be as addictive as possible and use dishonest labeling to make products appear healthier than they are. "We find that by changing the way teens think about healthy eating, we're able to increase the extent to which teens want to see themselves as healthy eaters...and by doing that, we're able to increase the rate at which teens make healthy choices," says Bryan.

The researchers are continuing to study whether their approach can effectively change teens' behavior long-term.

## **Downsides of calorie counting**

Counting calories may negatively impact an individual's ability to focus, according to researchers at the University of California at San Diego, Harvard University, and Princeton University.

"If you're counting calories, seemingly innocuous reminders of tempting, high-calorie food—such as an empty donut box in the middle of a conference table—can lead to worse performance on difficult tests of attention and reasoning ability," says lead researcher Aimee Chabot.

Many employers often provide indulgent food in meetings with the intention of motivating their staff, but that may be having an unintended negative effect. The researchers suggest that individuals looking to reduce their calorie intake avoid counting calories and instead opt for simpler strategies, such as avoiding added sugars or not eating after 7 p.m.

The research is still preliminary, and more data is being collected to replicate the initial results and examine the effect of the presence of actual tempting food on cognitive performance.

## **Effects of weight shaming**

Weight-loss campaigns and programs often portray overweight and obese individuals negatively. Researchers at the University of California at Santa Barbara have found that media messages that stigmatize obesity had negative behavioral and impacts on overweight participants. The [research](#) was published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

"Our research shows that weight stigma leads to behavioral responses that can ironically contribute to weight gain," says co-author Jeffrey Hunger. The researchers observed that self-perceived [overweight women](#) who read a weight-stigmatizing news article consumed more high-calorie snack foods compared to overweight women who read a neutral article.

"Simply reading about the potential for weight stigma was enough to impair self-regulation among overweight women," explains Hunger. The

research suggests that the mere threat of stigma can have important behavioral effects, even in cases where an individual does not directly experience weight-based mistreatment.

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