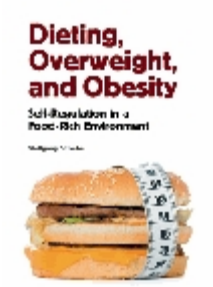
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# What To Eat? Goal-Conflict Theory and Weight Maintenance

A Review of

Dieting, Overweight, and Obesity: Self-Regulation in a Food-Rich Environment
by Wolfgang Stroebe
Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2008. 275 pp. ISBN 978-1-4338-0335-2. $59.95

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It is rare to find an individual who has not at some point been unhappy with his or her body. Who hasn't stood in front of the mirror and critiqued his or her appearance? It is becoming commonplace to see individuals comparing nutrition labels in the grocery store and opting for the low-fat, no-fat options. Commercials for weight loss products and programs abound. Weight is obviously on the collective mind of the public. Given that the world is in the throes of an obesity epidemic (World Health Organization, 2000), this increased attention to weight loss and regulation is not surprising. Add to this the increases in weight-related morbidity and mortality, and the fact that at least half the population is on a diet at any given time, and one would think that the rates of obesity and overweight should be stabilizing and slowly decreasing.

Yet this is not the case. Despite the frequency of dieting in the general population and the knowledge that overweight and obesity are accompanied by health problems, weight is increasing across the globe. This speaks to the difficulty most humans have in regulating their weight. Health professionals have developed any number of behavioral weight-loss programs, and though many are effective in the short term, long-term weight loss and maintenance are difficult (e.g., Mann et al., 2007).

Though the regulation of weight is deceptively simple (caloric intake needs to be equivalent to or less than caloric output), there are numerous factors that interact with this basic equation, not the least of which are psychological and environmental factors. Of course, the biology of the individual cannot be neglected. However, biology is not the whole story; recent changes in the environment and individual reactions to them also affect weight.

For example, recent years have shown an increase in the availability of fast food and an increased likelihood that American families will eat out or order food in. Given that food prepared in a restaurant typically is less healthy than that prepared at home (Guthrie, Biing-Hwan, & Frazao, 2002), the simple availability of increased food options outside the home (particularly inexpensive, “fast” options) can lead to an increase in caloric intake. Therefore, those who may have a genetic predisposition to weight gain may struggle even more in this type of environment. The impact of the environment is compounded by any number of individual factors, many of which have received a great deal of attention in research.

However, as Stroebe points out in *Dieting, Overweight, and Obesity: Self-Regulation in a Food-Rich Environment*, there is an important variable in weight regulation that has not received enough attention in the research literature thus far, namely food palatability. Individuals struggling with weight issues will mostly likely prefer food that tastes good. The desire to consume palatable foods and the desire to maintain or lose weight are often incompatible. This incompatibility leads one to Stroebe's goal-conflict theory.

Though Stroebe does not lay out his theory until the middle of the book, he sets the stage for it beautifully. One of the best things about this book is Stroebe's attention to past research and theories on weight regulation, including a clear and uncomplicated discussion of the biological and genetic determinants of weight. He follows this discussion with psychological theories—the history of which can be confusing and contradictory. Stroebe succinctly summarizes over 40 years of research and pays particular attention to the concept of restrained eating (Herman & Polivy, 1980). Research on restrained eating is rife with contradictory evidence, and it is presented in a well-balanced fashion. The goal-conflict theory of eating, when introduced, clearly accounts for most of these discrepancies.

Stroebe's theory posits that those who have a tendency to struggle with weight maintenance or weight gain need to find a balance between the desire to control weight and the desire to consume palatable food. Finding balance is difficult in an environment that caters to the easy attainment of palatable, high-fat food. When one is consistently presented with such foods, the goal of enjoying food becomes more salient than the goal to maintain weight, and the latter is temporarily suppressed. Suppressing the goal of weight control can lead to overconsumption.

What brings depth to this theory is the knowledge base of social psychology that Stroebe has integrated into it. The field of social psychology has much to offer in terms of helping us understanding consummatory behavior, but it is not often brought to bear. It is this element that not only makes the goal-conflict theory itself thought provoking but also places consummatory behavior in a larger scientific context.

Although *Dieting, Overweight, and Obesity* is written primarily for individuals in the field of body weight and health, the application of social cognitive theories results in a text that is highly readable and accessible to professionals in other fields, as well as to those who have a personal interest in understanding what may motivate their own behavior. This book should be recommended reading for any researcher or clinician who works in the field of weight regulation.

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