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OBSTACLES TO DIETING BEHAVIOR

*Shahram Heshmat, Ph.D.**

Despite documented short-term success, dieting has a very low success rates, most dieters regain their weight back within 3-5 years.¹ The question is why do people fail to stick to their goal for eating a healthy diet in order to lose weight? One possible answer is that people have self-control problems in the form of a present-biased preference.² From a prior perspective, they want to behave relatively patiently, but as the moment of action approaches, they want to behave relatively impatiently.³ The essay presents some insights from behavioral economics to explain why people fail to maintain healthy behavior.

The field of behavioral economics blends insights of psychology and economics.⁴ The basic message of behavioral economic is that humans are hard wired to make judgment errors, and they need a nudge to make decisions that are in their own best interest.⁵ A key concept in behavioral economics is that of how delayed rewards are discounted by individuals.⁶ Behavioral economic studies demonstrate that rewards are discounted proportionally with their delay.⁷ People will make relatively far-sided decisions when planning in advance, but will make relatively short-sighted decisions in the immediate moment.⁸ The followings explain why there is conflict between long-term human intentions and short-term actions.

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1. SHAHRAM HESHMAT, *EATING BEHAVIOR AND OBESITY: BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS STRATEGIES FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS 1* (2011).

2. *Id.* at 2.

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.* at 5.

5. *Id.* at 6.

6. HESHMAT, *supra* note 1, at 6.

7. *Id.*

8. *Id.* at 7.

The intention-action gap: People sometimes report feeling as though there were two selves inside them. These two selves, one more present-oriented and the other more future-oriented, are battling for control. The planner-self will often choose the largest reward, while the acting-self can be overcome by a desire for a smaller-sooner one.⁹ For example, a person might strongly intend to eat a low-calorie diet in order to stay healthy in the future, but in the moment of decision, he or she chooses to eat fatty French fries, which are more attractive in the short run than a healthy but less tasty low-fat salad.

Reflective System vs. Affective System: Self-control may be conceptualized as a struggle between two subsystems. The reflective (rational) system operates mostly consciously, uses logical rules, and deliberative.¹⁰ The impulsive (affective) system is associative and acts spontaneously without consideration for the broader consequences of the action.¹¹ Self-control failure implies that these two systems come into conflict with each other. If the deliberative system is able to attend to the conflict, the person may be able to resist the impulse, and otherwise the impulse is more likely to be expressed.

Willpower: When people exert willpower or self-control, they inhibit their normal, typical, or automatic behavior.¹² In general, willpower refers to effortful control that is exerted with the purpose of controlling our own behavior.¹³ Engaging in acts of self-control draws from a limited resource of self-control and become depleted over time, just as a muscle becomes tired after a period of exertion.¹⁴ The model of willpower implies that to improve self-control we need to carefully conserve the energy.¹⁵

The role of 'hot' emotional system: Strong feelings (e.g., hunger, stress, and cravings) shorten the time horizon and make us impatient. These strong feelings create something like a temporary preference for a certain course of action.¹⁶ The change in preferences, in turn, causes an individual to prefer immediate rewards, in which the benefits are delivered first and the costs come later, over options that have the opposite pattern.¹⁷ For example, bad moods cause dieters to eat more.

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.* at 8.

11. HESHMAT, *supra* note 1, at 8.

12. *Id.* at 127-8.

13. *Id.* at 127.

14. *Id.* at 128.

15. *Id.*

16. HESHMAT, *supra* note 1, at 114-15.

17. *Id.* at 110.

The immediacy effect: Proximity to temptation is one of the powerful determinants of self-control.¹⁸ Consumption items that immediately available seem to exert a disproportionate pull.¹⁹ This explains why a wide range of situations (cues) that produce impulsive reactions, such as the sight, touch, or smell of a desirable object.²⁰

Lapse-activated consumption: A common pattern of self-control failure for chronic dieters occur when they “fall off the wagon” by violating their diets. Once the diet is broken for the day, dieters appear to give up control, perhaps anticipating starting their diets anew the next day. For example, after eating a forbidden snack, dieters tend to have disinhibitory thoughts, like “I’ve already blown my diet, I might as well continue to eat,” and start overeating.

Projection bias: Projection bias is the tendency for people to underappreciate the effects of changes in their states, and hence falsely project their current preferences onto their future preferences (e.g., shopping on an empty stomach).²¹ For example, when people predict immediately after dinner how much they will enjoy a delicious breakfast the next morning, they understate the pleasure. They tend to reason that they are full now, so they will be full the next morning. Thus, people overestimate ability to resist temptations.

Modern life: Technological changes have brought about a progressive shift away from physically demanding tasks to knowledge-based work requiring an enhanced mental effort. The increased cognitive demand is associated with emotional stress (such as a burnout), which is known to favor overconsumption of comfort food as a coping mechanism. As a result, modern life requires a far greater amount of self-control.

Summary: In sum, behavioral economics suggests that self-control failure occurs whenever the balance is tipped in favor of impulsive system involved in reward and emotion. For example, negative mood and cue reactivity to appetizing foods interfere with self-control because they disrupt reflective mind, thereby tipping the balance. However, we are not powerless, and becoming self-aware of these forces actually helps to improve our self-control ability.

18. *Id.* at 123.

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.*

21. HESHMAT, *supra* note 1, at 176.

