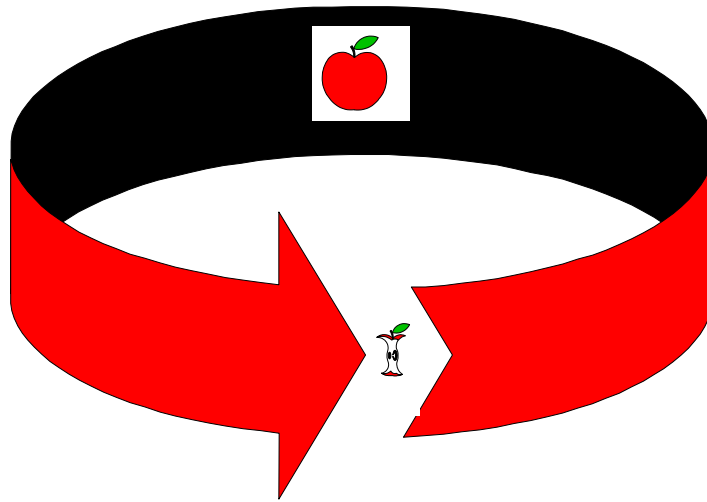


Smith's Word Diet



As a psychologist, I have no particular professional interest in providing treatment for consummatory disorders, but over the years I have had a number of friends ask advice about dieting and losing weight. As any conscientious professional, I am very selective and guarded in my responses to casual inquires and am well aware that **weight management is a complex matter requiring careful consideration of a wide range of physical and psychological individual differences.** But it is particularly difficult not to respond when the person asking has repeatedly sought professional help from physicians, psychologists and various self-help groups, is currently considering radical measures such as surgery, or is considering an unsupervised fad diet of questionable merit. Consequently, I do find myself responding to serious inquiries and such inquiries seem to be increasing.

I refer to my dieting "advice" as *Smith's Word Diet*. The advice has always been free for the asking and does not involve the purchase of any special products or services. The Word Diet is completely **compatible with any food diet and is recommended for anyone who plans to start such a diet.** It would take a rather large book to present the learning foundations and full cognitive and behavioral implications of *Smith's Word Diet*, but the advice itself is deceptively simple to state. Although I believe it to be good advice and generally beneficial, I am not aware of any directly related research and hope that someone more academically inclined (perhaps a Master's Thesis) will provide some.

The Word Diet is not just another pretty diet. It does have an easy appeal at first but it is not a joke and it definitely is not easy to follow. Be forewarned, it is not a game and should not be undertaken lightly. *Smith's Word Diet* is an extremely demanding and unforgiving instructional device **designed to facilitate long term changes** in established behavior patterns and to teach you first hand about your self.

In brief, thoughts are considered to be subject to the same principles of learning as external stimulus events and overt behavior. Instead of limiting the application of established principles of learning (classical and operant conditioning) to physiological responses and behaviors which are directly observable and measurable, **Smith's Word Diet enters the domain of your imagination and touches your very self.** Yet, it is neither mystical nor a product of New Age thinking. It "forces insight" and deals with the relationship between thoughts and behavior.

Since people with a weight problem engage in learned, apparently voluntary behaviors (i.e., food seeking and eating) that maintain "their" problem in the first place, others tend to be less than sympathetic with the

consequences they experience (i.e., weight gain). It is true that decreased food intake (i.e., called diets) and/or increased energy output (called exercise), will result in weight loss. And, it's true that changing "bad eating habits" (what, when, where, how you eat) or "changing your life style" (whatever that means) will affect your weight. But so will getting sick. And what happens when you get well again? You gradually gain your weight back and life goes on, for a while.

Excess weight is certainly a consequence of eating, but eating is a consequence of wanting to eat. Why do I weigh too much? --- Wrong question! Why do I eat too much? --- Right question! Next right questions: Why do I want to eat too much and **how can I decrease my desire to eat too much?** You only have one life to live and you can not live someone else's life/style or eat someone else's diet and be satisfied without changing what you want. You may be able to, at least temporarily, "discipline yourself" to exercise, "restrain yourself" from seeking and eating certain foods, "force yourself" to eat what you do not want, and, of course, "think thin." But! We know who you are and what will happen when you relax, lose your motivation to continue the good fight, or simply decide to stop working against your own self, your own desire --- **you will eventually eat consistent with what, when, where and how you want!**

It is natural for people to desire pleasure/comfort over pain/discomfort. Consequently, people "work" for pleasure/comfort and against pain/discomfort. Eating is an excellent natural source of both pleasure/comfort and a source of relief from pain/discomfort --- doubly reinforcing (i.e., both positively reinforcing and negatively reinforcing). But life and life sustaining behavior is never simple. After all, death is more natural than life. Life requires effort, work, behavior, but death is the natural outcome of doing nothing. As far as we know from experience, life is a temporary state-of-being which requires **constant maintenance**. In addition to breathing, achieving protection from the elements, and other sources of physical trauma, drinking and eating are necessary to sustain life, or, in other words, drinking and eating are necessary to delay the onset of death. **We are naturally predisposed to such life sustaining behavior because we experience pain/discomfort when we do nothing.** We become hungry when we do not eat and thirsty when we do not drink.

In general, **the quicker you can die from not engaging in a particular behavior, the more potent the pain/discomfort experienced.** Try not breathing, not drinking water or not eating food and you will find a consistent rank order of the pain/discomfort experienced. Fortunately, or naturally, the ease of the behavior (breathing, drinking, eating) and the availability of the "reinforcers" (air, water, food) are also rank ordered, but in reverse order, allowing more time for us to acquire the less readily available necessities of life.

It is important to note that not engaging in behaviors that are essential for life generally results in felt pain/discomfort. Hunger is not generally a desirable state-of-being or a pleasant experience. **Hunger is an aversive motivational state and people will engage in behavior (think/work) to decrease or terminate it.** Under such conditions, food seeking behavior and eating are reinforced (strengthened) because they decrease pain/discomfort. Similarly, simply thinking about (or talking about) being hungry makes matters worse, not better.

Thoughts and fears, including hunger, may be rational or irrational, based on past deprivations or future expectations, but such thoughts do motivate behavior. However, eating can also produce pleasure/comfort quite aside from any felt or feared pain/discomfort. Under such conditions, food seeking behavior and eating are reinforced (strengthened) because they increase pleasure/comfort (pleasurable sensory experience, feelings of well-being). **Thus, eating and behaviors related to eating are learned and maintained based on both pleasure/comfort and pain/discomfort.**

People "behave" or act the way they do because of their genetic makeup or heredity, their learning history, their current physical/cognitive state and their current life situation. In brief, people behave the way they do because of what they:

- ◆ can experience/do,
- ◆ have experienced/done,
- ◆ are experiencing/doing,
- ◆ expect to experience/do, and
- ◆ want to experience/do.

In behavioral terms, people emit or engage in behavior (act/work/think) **to gain** positive reinforcers or rewards (i.e., positive reinforcement) and **to avoid** or terminate negative reinforcers or punishers (i.e., negative reinforcement). Similarly, people will inhibit or suppress behavior in order to protect or avoid the loss of positive reinforcers (i.e., technically called "negative punishment" or "time-out from positive reinforcement") and to delay or avoid the onset of negative reinforcers (i.e., technically called "positive punishment" or simply "punishment"). But, keep in mind that **reinforcement is always relative to current conditions and alternatives:** people will work (behave/think) to experience or acquire a less potent

negative reinforcer rather than a more potent negative reinforcer (“the lesser of two evils”), and they will work (i.e., behave/think/expend resources) to experience or acquire a more potent positive reinforcer rather than a less potent positive reinforcer (“the greater good”). "***Relatively***" speaking, less of a good thing is punishing and less of a bad thing is reinforcing.

So-called "Behaviorists" deal with measurable, external behavior and they investigate and discuss behavior in terms of the function of the behavior in relation to its external consequences. That is, behaviors that lead to the acquisition of a "positive reinforcer" such as food or water are often called appetitive, consummatory or approach behaviors, whereas behaviors that lead to the termination or delay of a "negative reinforcer" are called escape or avoidance behaviors. However, it is important to keep in mind that the "positively reinforcing properties" of primary reinforcers such as water and food are directly based on their ability to relieve aversive physiological states (thirst and hunger) and the potency of such external reinforcers is directly related to the degree of deprivation. Consequently, **any consummatory behavior (e.g., eating, sex) can function as an escape/avoidance behavior** based on a directly related aversive physiological state (hunger, desire), as well as to other less obvious sources of internal or external pain/discomfort (physical or mental).

Eating is generally considered to be the easiest to learn of all survival skills or independent living skills, such ease typically being attributed to the general role of food as a source of immediate, positive reinforcement and the fact that consummatory behavior **involves learning related to all five senses** (gustatory/taste, olfactory/smell, tactile/touch, visual/sight, and auditory/hearing). Additionally, most of the undesirable effects of eating disorders (obesity, health) are delayed, making such consequences of much less effect. However, hunger is experienced as aversive and provides motivation to engage in behavior for relief. Simple chewing, swallowing and/or having a full stomach provide some relief from hunger.

Hunger and physiological factors aside, consider the practical impact of eating disorders. **Eating requires little energy expenditure but may have a profound impact** on the behavior of others and the individual's general cognitive-behavioral environment. Such behaviors have a high potential for being shaped by their consequences.

Eating aside, obesity itself produces a wide range of personal and interpersonal consequences related to "treatment," performance demands, physical limitations, attention, personal relationships, etc.

All this being said, it is really quite amazing how little consideration we give to how our **thoughts affect not only our emotions and behavior, but our very health and who we are.** As occasionally rational beings, humans have a private "*internal reality*" in which they are quite literally creator and god. Within the limits of memory and cognitive functioning, and without the limits of space and time, for good or for bad, in sickness and in health, we can **imagine anything we desire and desire anything we can imagine.** In fact, other than immediate experience, our entire existence is a figment of our imaginations (i.e., both past and future are matters of imagination and we are, after all is said and done, only our memories and conditioning history). Our inner realities may be more or less accurate and more or less complete models of "external reality," and our memories may be more or less accurate and complete, but the past no longer exists and the future has not yet arrived.

Since human behavior is "lawful" because it must obey the lawful principles of learning, words are lawful tools of human reason and communication --- "invisible pockets" variously filled and drained of meaning, function and potency through repeated associations, use and experience --- abstract symbols which acquire the functional properties of the sensory events and behaviors they represent.

Like the physical laws of the universe, the basic principles of learning, including **the basic principles of "creative thought," the "lawful" nature of words are in effect at all times, regardless of our knowledge or awareness of their operations in our daily lives.** Just as Einstein's theory of relativity is currently of limited use in the domain of quantum physics, and behaviorists are poorly equipped to discuss an individual's feelings, the lack of a unified theory which integrates the words we say, hear, see and think, does not mean there is not a lawful relationship between the external reality of our sensory experiences and the internal reality of our imaginations.

Words are interrelated and acquire meaning and function through use and experience. When you think, fantasize, or exercise your imagination in any way, you are creating real physiological experiences, establishing new perceptual and response predispositions, and changing and **shaping your self** just as surely, and according to the same laws of cause and effect, as any so-called "real experience." What you think about and what you say have profound affects on what you want and what you will and will not do.

Words have the power and function of real life events. For example, thoughts can directly elicit (stimulate or produce) physiological reactions. Imagine slowly sinking your teeth into a juicy lemon and you (pardon the comparison) will salivate like Pavlov's dog. You may not salivate quite as much as if you

had actually bitten into a lemon, but the thought of the behavior will produce the same physiological reactions as the actual behavior, only on a smaller scale. In fact, just now, by reading somebody else's suggestion of a thought, you imagined a behavior and had a real physiological experience. Quite remarkable when you think about it. Words do indeed have power and thoughts create very real experiences.

Thinking about biting into a lemon is not a particularly rewarding experience. In fact, it is no more rewarding than actually biting into a lemon, which can be quite unpleasant and is not likely to be indulged in often or freely. People are simply not inclined to dwell on or engage in relatively unpleasant experiences for pleasure, as a “free operant” experience. Such behavior may occur as an active defense against even more unpleasant thoughts or feelings, and unpleasant thoughts are certainly generated by emotional states such as fear, anger, guilt and depression, as well as by other more obvious physiological states such as pain and deprivation, but all other things being equal, **people naturally prefer to dwell on and experience pleasure and comfort rather than pain and discomfort.**

It is clearly self-defeating for anyone wanting to lose weight to be talking about food. Talking about food and eating is a form of self-reinforcement (positive and/or negative). When two or more people discuss food and eating, mutual reinforcement is occurring. However, talking about food and eating also increases your *desire* to eat, generally stimulates your hunger, ***particularly increasing desire for the food items discussed,*** bringing into play the negatively reinforcing function of eating to relieve hunger. Additionally, since **any type of pleasure/comfort may also function as a means of coping with any type of pain/discomfort,** talking about food and eating, as well as actually eating, may be functioning as an escape/avoidance response to chronic pain, stress, anxiety, depression, anger, guilt, unavailable or forbidden desire, etc.

Smith's Word Diet:

Phase 1:

Eliminate all nonessential spoken words about food, eating, and dieting for 30 consecutive days.

You are allowed only 10 mistakes, after which you must start over.

You keep count of your own mistakes and document each mistake as to time, place and circumstance for later review. You may also want to document your general mood and thoughts about the word diet prior to going to bed each night.

The only exceptions allowed are:

1. to answer and ask questions essential for meal preparation.
2. communications required by your occupation.
3. communications with any physical or mental health care professional or for any treatment.
4. communications with anyone to inform them that you are on Smith's Word Diet and can not discuss food or eating unless it is absolutely essential.

Any other comment from you about food, eating or dieting will count against you. For examples, you are permitted to order food in a restaurant, request items in the supermarket, and to ask your spouse what he/she would like for dinner. But you are not allowed to ask other people what they plan to order at the restaurant (unless you are a waiter or waitress), to engage in small talk about food at the supermarket checkout line, or to ask your spouse to bring you something to eat while watching television. When in doubt, it is probably a mistake. You are only allowed 10 before you have to start over.

Before starting *Smith's Word Diet*, it is highly advisable to **inform family members and friends in advance** that you will not be engaging in any small talk about food, eating or diets. In fact, to add an element of humor and for moral support during this difficult and frustrating time, start the Smith's Word Diet with a friend or two. You can help each other keep score.

Smith's Word Diet is a "real" learning experience with real effects. If you seriously attempt to follow it, you will find yourself becoming increasingly aware of the functions of food, eating and dieting in your life. You will also find yourself actively avoiding thoughts about food and eating in order to avoid talking about food and eating. It is a very difficult and frustrating diet to follow, but it will make success on any food diet a piece of cake.

A final word of caution:

To the degree that weight is a significant problem for you and food is an overly important part of your life, **expect frustration, anger, depression and anxiety.** If your problem of eating is secondary to significant anxiety, anger or depression, or you are currently receiving mental health or physical treatment of any kind, or have a diagnosed physical or mental condition of any type, **discuss this diet with your therapist, physician, or self-help group.**

Few people are able to complete this 30 day diet of words. Curious.



Russell