

How to help patients navigate the mental aspects of unhealthy eating habits

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Webinar Objectives:

- Be able to identify a wide variety of thinking errors to recognize them in patients and help them understand how those thought processes are impacting their food behaviors.
- Understand how to help patients become self-regulated in their eating behaviors.
- Learn tools for helping patients practice sustainable, balanced eating patterns that encourage mental flexibility.

Disclosures

I receive honoraria for CE courses and seminars, including this one. However, I have no relevant or material financial interests that relate to the research described in this webinar.

**Mental health = A nervous system that is resilient and integrated, which creates flexible, adaptive, coherent and stable states of thinking.
This leads to healthy self-regulation.**

**Mental illness = lack of integration which creates rigidity, chaos or some combination of both.
This leads to dysregulation.**

Dr Dan Siegel, The Mindful Therapist

"Almost every mental health problem - anxiety, depression, eating disorders, personality disorders, thinking disorders - are issues of self-regulation."

Dr Dan Siegel, The Mindful Therapist

Self-regulation: the act of something regulating itself without intervention from external bodies.

Behavioral self-regulation = the ability to act in your long-term best interest, consistent with your deepest values.

Emotional self-regulation = control or influence over your emotions without impulsivity, even when the experience creates an ongoing demand.

Self-regulation theory is based on the idea that much of human behavior is directed at accomplishing goals.

1. Standards of desirable behavior: In an ideal world, how does the patient want to feel and behave around food?
2. Motivation to meet those standards: Why do they want to feel and behave that way? Why is this important to them?
3. Monitoring of situations and thoughts that precede breaking standards: Get curious and aim to understand slip-ups rather than see them as failures. What happened that made them behave in a way that wasn't inline with their values?
4. Willpower - allowing one's internal strength to control urges: How can they create space between a stimulus and a reaction? How can they practice pausing in order to make an intentional choice? How can you help ensure they have the needed reserve of willpower?

Intuitive Eating is a self-care eating framework, which integrates instinct, emotion, and rational thought. It is the ultimate self-regulation tool for eating behaviors.

Most common thinking errors

- All or nothing thinking: inability to see nuance, shades of grey or more than 2 options. Things are fantastic or awful, you are perfect or a failure.
- Overgeneralization: this sounds like always/never, everybody/nobody. Drawing too wide of conclusions from known facts. "People who eat dessert every night don't care about their health." "People in larger bodies are that way because they always eat too much."
- Mind reading: inaccurate belief that you can guess what other people are thinking. "That person didn't say hi to me - it must be because they noticed I gained weight and think I'm lazy and stupid."
- Magnification/minimization: exaggerates or minimizes the importance of things. "I was able to stop when I was full at breakfast all week, but not at the other meals so it doesn't mean anything." "I binged this weekend so now I have to basically start over."

Most common thinking errors

- Fortune telling: the tendency to jump to conclusions based on little evidence or ignoring more information. "I ate ice cream and now I'm going to get diabetes."
- Catastrophizing: assuming things are much worse than they actually are. "I haven't exercised this week and am going to gain 10 pounds because of it."
- Personalization: taking experiences and situations and making them all about you, without considering other possible factors that could be influencing the circumstances. "My doctor wasn't very friendly at my appointment today. He probably thinks I don't care about my health."
- Should statements: comments you make to yourself about what you "should" do, "ought" to do, or "must" do. This is problematic because it builds resentment with yourself and doesn't provide useful motivation for change. "I should eat healthier."

Psychological flexibility can be described as helping people maintain meaningful behaviors in their lives even when difficult thoughts, feelings, memories or sensations are present. It's staying connected to values instead of avoiding situations to avoid pain or discomfort.

Flexibility

- Spontaneity
- Freedom
- Permission
- Satisfaction
- Relaxed

Structure

- Consistency
- Rhythm
- Predictability
- Nourishment
- Intentional

Flexible structure for practicing balance in eating

- Anticipate hunger every 2-4 hours, (a meal lasting closer to 3-4 hours and a snack lasting closer to 1-2 hours)
 - Aim to include 3-5 food groups at meals and 1-3 food groups at snacks.
 - Minimize distractions while eating. This isn't all-or-nothing, just do what you can to put yourself in the best position to understand what your body is communicating to you.
 - Choose what sounds good to eat, pairing them with things that will increase nourishment and satisfaction.
 - Trust your body to signal to you when you've had enough.
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Add vs Subtract

There's a dangerous cultural message that healthy eating equals restrictive eating, which only encourages an all-or-nothing mentality with food.

As RDs, we need to intentionally challenge that narrative by encouraging more inclusivity and variety with food.

The flexible structure provides a way for patients to take foods they love and would likely cut out if they were on a diet or strict meal plan, and find ways to add them to regular meals and snacks. As simple as it may sound, this is how they come to see that all foods can fit and that they can have flexibility AND structure.

Take-aways for helping clients with mental hurdles

- Use self-regulation theory guidelines for helping a patient identify goals and work toward them in a values based way.
- Be familiar with common thinking errors so you can bring attention to pathological thinking that is impeding progress.
- Work to establish a flexible structure with the patient so they can start behaving in ways that reinforce helpful ways of thinking.

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