

Can Lifestyle Seminars and Self-Help Groups Contribute to Sustained Weight Loss?

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groups can be used as a support system and health promotion strategy outside or inside professional healthcare settings [18].

Self-help groups and self-administered programs may be viable alternatives. As far as we know there are no self-help groups included in any weight reduction program in Europe.

Aim

The overall aim of this study was to evaluate whether a treatment model consisting of lifestyle seminars and self-help groups could improve and sustain weight loss for a group of persons with overweight. Furthermore, we wanted to know the causes of overweight as formulated by the participating persons.

Materials and Methods

This is an intervention study that entailed life-style seminars and the self-help groups with follow up after 6 and 12 months.

The participants were recruited through primary health care centers, physical fitness centers and the University College in a medium sized town in Sweden where information sheets were distributed at these places. The inclusion criteria were BMI ≥ 30 kg/m², age ≥ 30 years and exclusion criteria were pregnancy or eating disorders.

Fifty-five individuals who agreed to participate in the study were selected. The participants received oral and written information about the study at an introductory group meeting and if they still agreed to participate they signed an informed consent form at the subsequent individual interview.

Participants' characteristics were collected with questionnaires.

Body weight was checked before and after the lifestyle seminars and after the self-help groups.

Seminar number	Issue
1	Feelings and experiences from being obese
2	Nutrition and eating habits [1]
3	Physical activity (theory) [1]
4	Motivation
5	Setting goals and making a plan
6	Problem solving
7	Stress and coping
8	Hunger and craving
9	Social support and communication
10	Nutrition and eating habits [2]
11	Physical activity (theory) [2]
12	A sustained behavior change, risky situations and overcoming relapses

model and therefore moves from the general to the specific. The analysis is used when the structure of analysis is operationalized on the basis of previous knowledge and the purpose of the study is to test a theory [20,21]. There are no systematic rules for analyzing data; the key feature of all content analysis is that many words and meaning units from the text are classified into much smaller content categories [22,23]. The unit of analysis could be a word or a theme [24]. According to Robson researchers are guided by the aim and research question of the study in choosing what content they analyze [25]. The deductive content analysis may involve testing categories, concepts, models or hypotheses [26].

The interviews were analyzed separately and together by the authors and a consensus achieved on categories and themes. The results of this type of analysis provide insight on the meanings of the categories which are described through subcategories [26].

Ethics

The study was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Gothenburg Sweden.

Results

Fifteen participants started the program. They were divided into two groups, eight participants in group 1 and seven in group 2. Three participants dropped out during the lifestyle seminars, one from group 1 and 2 from group 2. The reasons cited for leaving were failure to lose weight and lack of time.

The 12 participants' age varied from 35 to 73 years (median age 54 years), eight of them were married and three were single, six had a

But few of the participants reported change in dietary habits. Someone had increased their intake of vegetables and another had decreased the intake of cookies and candies.

The weight development during the program differed among participants. Even the participants who did not lose weight became more conscious of which habits to change in order to achieve weight loss.

time and lack of support at the gym. The gym may also be too far away and the fee for enrolling in a gym too high.

"I meant to go to the gym, but it is inconvenient to get there. It is almost 12 miles and it would be easy using the car. I guess it is a question of laziness".

"It was easier during the lifestyle seminars because it was free of charge".

One person found a more unplanned strategy as reason for weight loss.

"The self-help group has not affected my weight. I have lost a few kilos but that is because I have bought a dog. The dog has helped me to lose weight".

Some participants had not yet reached their ultimate weight goal, but had started a process which they intended to continue. Others underlined the importance of continuously focusing on healthy living, giving priority to maintain the eating habits introduced during step 1 and reducing stress.

"I have started to change habits. I'm beginning to see what is wrong with my present meal habits. I have a plan what habits to change for me and my family in order to achieve a good result".

Yet another said:

"During stressful periods it is harder to follow the routines. I do think that I could follow a plan for healthy and better eating habits if I prioritize time to do so".

Most of the participants appreciated that the self-help group meetings and the weight controls were regularly

"I think it is good to meet every week. The regularity (of meetings) contributes to the feeling of seriousness of the project compared with if the meetings had been more intermittent".

It is good to monitor weight every week. This makes it easier to keep track of the weight changes and to adjust behavior accordingly.

Another participant said:

"There is always a little pressure looking forward to the weigh-in every week, even if the others do not know my weight. ... It is good to see the weight in black or white".

Some participants were positive about the use of the themes, but others were not as the following quotes suggest:

"It is very good to use themes. Sometimes we have used several themes during the group meeting and other times we have spoken for a longer time about just one theme. The themes made me reflect a lot. I understand what I've done in order to be so obese and why I did it".

"Towards the end the themes expired and it became more interesting when we didn't use the themes".

An experience described in group 2 was that a minimum number of participants were needed in order for the group dynamics to evolve:

*"We were too few in the group to get any dynamics going".
"Including five to six persons makes a good group size".*

Discussion

The aim of this study was to evaluate whether a treatment model consisting of lifestyle seminars and self-help groups could improve and

sustain weight loss. More than half the participants were well-educated, which is not in accordance with other studies [2]. It may have had an impact in positive direction on the result.

The weight loss and the interview with the participants indicate that lifestyle seminars and self-help groups contributed to their weight loss. Ten of 11 persons reduced their initial bodyweight even if some had a very small weight loss. All participants reported emotional reasons for overeating and that has been reported elsewhere [27,28]. However, there was an important difference regarding weight loss between the participants. Those with a weight loss of more than 5% and sustained the weight loss six months, expressed more awareness and reflecting about the emotional reasons related to their eating behavior. They were able to identify the different emotions and reflect about how to deal with them and did not need food to regulate unpleasant feelings. This is probably the most crucial factor for sustained weight loss as emotional awareness is very important for psychic health [29].

Our results indicate that continued weight reduction and sustained weight change are also supported by regular group meetings and overall the participants in this study expressed positive experiences of the self-help group even those who dropped out. Some got support from the other participants in the group and some found discussing food habits and physical activity during the group meetings was motivating. Even the participant who did not lose weight or those who just had a little weight loss said they had become more reflecting, aware of their habits and understood the need to change life style in order to achieve weight loss "there is no other way".

One negative experience of the self-help group was that the purpose was unclear. That underlines the importance of being very clear in the introduction to the self-help group, inform about the aim with such a group, why the leader is passive or leaderless and maybe you even could let people discuss advantages and disadvantages with the model of self-help group before they start.

Offering a self-help group after weight loss may be one way to prevent relapse to former lifestyle habits leading to regaining the lost weight. In the current study three participants dropped out during the lifestyle seminars and five during the self-help groups. The reasons cited for leaving the lifestyle seminars were failure to lose weight and lack of time. The reason for leaving the self-help group was small group size and lack of time. Maybe lifestyle seminars are enough for some people and for others the self-help groups may give an opportunity for reflection about emotional reasons for overeating and thus provide support to sustain weight loss or reach a decision in trying to really change life style. They need more time to take the step towards a change that [15] stated.

Seven of 15 participants completed the entire program. Four of the participants who started the second half of the program achieved a sustained weight loss of more than 5% after six months. Our result is similar to that reported by [30] where approximately 20 percent of the participants in organized weight loss activities have been found to sustain their weight loss. The highest reported sustained weight losses (45%) have been observed in individuals who achieved sustained weight loss on their own [31]. In our study sustained weight loss was not related to the background variables, sex, age, marital status, education or occupational status. However, overweight is a complex problem and may be related to several individual combinations of causes that also warrants intervention programs. It is important to take into account individual differences among people and accept that people may know best the right way for them to reduce weight. There

is no one way to support overweight individuals to lose weight and there is no "quick fix".