



e-quilibrium

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Environmental Cues

The environment is toxic with respect to weight management. This is an assertion of Yale psychologist and international obesity expert, Dr. Kelly Brownell. The environment is replete with cues and incentives to overeat and be sedentary. Fast food restaurants, vending machines, and mini-marts are readily available. Food advertisements are ubiquitous. Conversely, stairways are often out-of-sight in buildings and sidewalks are frequently absent in neighborhoods. Remote controls eliminate the need for walking to operate many devices.

Because much of human behavior is automatic, environmental cues for unhealthy behaviors strain the self-control of individuals trying to manage weight. Although many individuals are nonetheless able to successfully lose weight, the toxic environment contributes to the fact that that many of these same individuals eventually regain the lost weight. But that isn't the case for everyone. What can be learned from those who successfully maintain weight loss?

The National Weight Control Registry (www.nwcr.ws) tracks individuals who maintain weight loss. These are people who have lost from 30 - 300 pounds, with an average weight loss of 66 pounds that is been maintained for over 5 years.

Among those in the registry:

- 78% eat breakfast
- 75% weigh themselves at least one time each week
- 62% watch less than 10 hours of television per week
- 90% exercise, on average, at least 1 hour per day

Indeed, it would appear that these individuals have a great deal of self-control. But given the impact of environment on behavior, what, if anything, is different about their home environments?

In late 2009, an article was published in the Annals of Behavioral Medicine which detailed differences in the home environments of weight loss maintainers from individuals seeking treatment for obesity. Not surprisingly, weight loss maintainers had:

- more low-fat foods in their homes (including more fruits and vegetables)
- less high-fat foods in their homes
- fewer TVs
- more home exercise equipment

Health behavior change certainly requires motivation and self-control, but the environment is also a critical part of the equation. It often is necessary to make changes in one's immediate surroundings to reduce the toxicity of the environment.

Paul J. Hershberger, Ph.D.

... is a clinical health psychologist. He is Professor of Family Medicine and Director of Behavioral Science for the Family Medicine Residency Program, Wright State University Boonshoft School of Medicine. His clinical practice includes psychotherapy, consultation, and coaching.

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To contact Dr. Hershberger:

e-mail: paul.hershberger@wright.edu
phone: (937) 278-6251, ext 2021