

The Obesity and Depression Connection

By Susan Fishman

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Suffering from obesity or depression alone can be overwhelming, but when the two are combined—as they often are—it can be devastating. According to surveys by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), adults with depression are more likely to be obese than adults without depression. And results showed that the proportion of adults with obesity rose as the severity of depression increased.

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The Effects of Obesity on Cholesterol Levels

Obesity is a risk factor for high cholesterol, but lifestyle changes can bring about improvements.

The reverse also seems to hold true. One recent study found that obese people have a 20% higher risk of depression. For Caucasian, college-educated obese people, the risk rises to as high as 44%. And some studies show that women are much more vulnerable to the obesity-depression cycle than men.

So which comes first? Gaining excess weight, or the depressive symptoms? And what can you do to stop the vicious cycle?

One Feeds the Other

Though it's not exactly clear which comes first, most experts agree that obesity and depression go hand in hand. One can trigger and influence the other. Being overweight and not getting enough exercise can lead to symptoms of depression, just as being depressed may cause you to overeat (or binge eat) and become less active, thus gaining weight. A long list of independent health concerns (diabetes, hypothyroidism, chronic pain syndromes, and many more) are responsible for fueling both obesity and depression.

Medication for depression may also contribute to obesity. The CDC surveys reported that 55% of adults who were taking antidepressant medication, but still reported moderate to severe depressive symptoms, were obese.

The Obesity Factor

Risk factors for obesity can run in families, but more often the cause is a result of emotional issues, such as sadness, anxiety or stress. People who are obese are often self-conscious about their appearance, and they may withdraw or feel excluded from social activities. Children are especially vulnerable to feelings of low self-worth and social isolation from their peers, which can follow them into adulthood. Meanwhile, obesity could be affecting them physically, causing shortness of breath, aches and pains, trouble sleeping and digestive problems, triggering further feelings of sadness and despair.

The Depression Factor

Depression is both a cause and result of stress. Sadness, despair, anxiety—all of these can lead to overeating, forgoing exercise and feeling less

motivated to follow a diet or take the time to prepare healthy foods. If left untreated, depression can soon affect the waistline, with significant health consequences. If you have a very high body mass index (BMI)—that is, your weight is largely more than what is considered healthy for your height—you may be increasing your risk of serious health conditions, including hypertension, heart disease and stroke, type 2 diabetes, chronic fatigue, asthma, sleep apnea and some forms of cancer.

What Can Help

- **Losing weight.**

Studies have shown significant mood improvements in people with depression after major weight loss. Though exercise, reducing calorie intake and stress reduction are typically the first steps toward treatment, many patients have seen great improvement following gastric restrictive procedures. Your doctor can help you map out a diet and exercise plan, and let you know if surgery is a good option for you.

- **Staying active.**

Exercise is not only imperative for maintaining a healthy heart and BMI, it can also do wonders for your emotional health. Start slowly with activities you enjoy so you are more likely to stick with them. Then work with your doctor to increase your regimen as you begin to lose weight and feel better.

- **Talking to a professional.**

A psychologist can help you get to the bottom of the emotional issues that contributed to your weight gain. Find a trusted professional you can confide in. Ask your doctor or close friends for recommendations, and interview two or more to find the best fit for you.

- **Take it slowly.** Though losing weight and improving your mood is the ultimate goal, be aware that antidepressants can cause weight gain, and dieting can actually worsen your mood (start with cutting back on portion sizes rather than jumping into a strict diet). Talk to your doctor about a treatment plan you can ease into with minimal side effects.

- **Don't beat yourself up.** Gaining the weight took time, and so will losing it. Be patient with yourself, and if you stray from your weight-loss plan, try not to fall into the trap of negative self-talk. Instead, look at what thoughts or feelings caused you to eat more at a particular time, and how you can deal with them in ways other than overeating.

While there is still much to learn about the link between obesity and depression, the fact that the two are associated is clear. Understanding that one can lead to the other is a great first step in finding the right treatment and knocking out both for good.

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