



**Believe and Good Health May Happen**

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If you really believe in your ability to lose weight, will that make your attempt successful? More and more studies show that positive thinking is definitely part of successful changes in health habits, including weight loss.

Many years of research have investigated how our thoughts and actions influence each other. One prominent concept in this area is “self-efficacy.” It refers to a person’s belief in his or her ability to overcome barriers and perform a particular task. Studies show that people tend to pursue a goal or new behavior more diligently if they believe they can succeed. When people think a task exceeds their abilities, most will avoid it or give up easily when faced with obstacles.

Keep in mind that self-efficacy is not the same as self-confidence or self-esteem. For example, someone can think that they are a good person and intelligent, but feel too uncoordinated for sports or too undisciplined to cut back on extra eating. That person has low feelings of self-efficacy for changing his or her sports involvement or refraining from unnecessary eating.

Self-efficacy can predict a variety of health behaviors, including smoking cessation and balanced food choices. Previous studies show that those with a high belief in their ability to lose weight lost more and were more likely to stay in a program.

Positive belief also correlates with exercise. A recent study compared two types of programs for obese, sedentary women: a traditional one and one that tried to change the

way the women thought about activity. In the latter program, fewer women quit. In it, the women's degree of fitness, physical activity and self-efficacy was also affected significantly more.

One of the latest studies focuses on self-efficacy and weight loss. Overweight college students were assigned to one of two different weight control programs: either a program meant to develop healthy eating patterns, or a similar one with added weekly activities designed to increase self-efficacy. After 12 weeks, those in the second group showed more nutritious eating habits and slightly better weight loss. The standard weight loss group averaged slightly less than a half-pound per week, while the self-efficacy group averaged three-fourths of a pound each week. The weight loss between the two study groups is not statistically significant. But over time the difference could be considerable – more than 10 pounds in a year.

Although self-efficacy is important, clearly we have much to learn about how to change it. In this last study, even within the self-efficacy treatment group, participants showed wide ranges of improvement. Some barely changed, while others made major improvements. People with a history of failing, or who are repeatedly told by others or themselves that they will fail, probably have a much harder time developing positive feelings for success.

Of course, simplistic optimism is not the goal. To change health habits, it is probably crucial to believe that you can learn to follow healthful eating and exercise patterns. The stress is on learning. Those who say they have a permanent personality fault or a goal that is too difficult may just give up. Those who realistically see challenges and still persevere may succeed best. For those who are ready and think they can change, reliable sources,

like the American Institute for Cancer Research and government web sites, offer loads of good health information.

If you need help to improve your eating habits and prevent weight gain, *Shape Your Future...Your Weigh!*<sup>TM</sup> can help. Contact your local base Health and Wellness Center (HAWC) or Dietitian for more information.