Diets Aren't the Way to a Successful Wellness Program, Says New Study



Many workplace wellness programs focus on helping workers lose weight, such as through dieting. But according to a new study, if your wellness program doesn't also help workers change their whole approach to food and eating, they're likely to gain back any weight they may lose.

The study by researchers from the University of Missouri, 'Eat for Life: A Worksite Feasibility Study of a Novel Mindfulness-based Intuitive Eating Intervention,' was published in the *American Journal of Health Promotion*.

The vast majority of wellness programs limit their approach to promoting diets. These programs focus on weight challenges in which participants are repeatedly weighing themselves. These actions can help participants initially lose weight, but they often gain the weight back when the challenge is gone and the program is over.

So the researchers evaluated the effectiveness of the 'Eat for Life' program, which combines 'intuitive eating' and mindfulness to help participants develop positive relationships with food and their bodies.

'Intuitive eating' is when individuals learn to eat, exercise and experience their bodies from their own internal cues, such as hunger and fullness, rather than external cues, such as

calorie counting and weight scales. For example, participants in the Eat for Life program are asked *not* to weigh themselves the entire 10-weeks of the program.

‘Intuitive eating and mindfulness are two relatively new intervention approaches that have been effective in supporting healthy eating and body image,’ said Lynn Rossy, a health psychologist for the UM System. ‘Eat for Life encourages individuals to become more engaged with their internal body signals and not the numbers on the scales.’

The researchers found that Eat for Life is more effective than traditional weight-loss programs in improving individuals’ views of their bodies and decreasing problematic eating behaviors.

Women who participated in Eat for Life reported higher levels of body appreciation and intuitive eating and lower levels of problematic eating behaviours, such as binging, purging and fasting, as compared to women who didn’t participate in the program.

Eat for Life participants’ weights ranged from normal to morbidly obese. Some women displayed eating disorder behaviors. At the end of the program, participants in the Eat for Life program were significantly more likely not to exhibit disordered eating. Mindfulness was a major factor in all of the positive outcomes, Rossy said.

‘Eat for Life is not just for individuals with eating disorders,’ said Rossy. ‘This type of intervention program is for a variety of individuals who want to have more knowledge on how to be healthy and how to appreciate their bodies’ value.’