

# Transformative Events Help Teens Lose Weight

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PHILADELPHIA — An “ah-ha!” moment can be the key to teen weight loss.

Adolescents who experience a “transformative event”—an experience that changes their self-concept with regard to weight or exercise—are apparently more likely to lose weight than are those who never undergo such a moment, Dr. Alex is Lieberman said at the annual meeting of

the Eastern Society for Pediatric Research.

For some teens, the experience comes during a serious talk with a physician; for others, athletics is the motivating factor. But whatever the force behind the transformative event, she said, it appears to be a vital part of the weight loss experience.

Dr. Lieberman presented the results of a qualitative study of 22 teens, all black, inner city residents with a mean age of 16 years. All the teens had either gained or lost at least 2 kg/m<sup>2</sup> over 2 or more years.

They participated in a series of structured interviews and focus group meetings, during which Dr. Lieberman and her colleagues explored important contributors to their weight change, including dietary habits, knowledge of healthy eating, finances and the impact of poverty, psychology, exercise, and home-school environment. The group included 10 weight increasers (six males and four females) with an average body mass index (BMI) of 38 kg/m<sup>2</sup>, and 12 weight decreaseers (six

males and six females) with an average BMI of 28 kg/m<sup>2</sup>.

The groups had similarly poor dietary habits, she said. Both tended to skip breakfast, eat junk food instead of meals, and buy snacks at local convenience stores. Interestingly, they did have a good basic knowledge of what constitutes a healthy diet.

Poverty did not play as large a role as the researchers anticipated. While a lack of money did increase a teen's tendency to buy cheap, low-quality foods, it also forced many into the subsidized food programs at their schools. “Not having money meant they couldn't buy french fries in the cafeteria, and



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**Not having money meant they couldn't buy french fries, and instead had to go to the free lunch line.**

**DR. LIEBERMAN**

instead had to go to the free lunch line, where the food was supposedly healthier,” said Dr. Lieberman, a pediatrician at Albert Einstein Medical Center, Philadelphia.

Several important thematic differences emerged between the groups.

A transformative experience occurred in six of the weight decreaseers and only two of the weight increasers. For several of the decreaseers, the moment was a meeting with a physician, especially being told they were at risk of developing diabetes. Some related that prognosis to the same illness in a relative, and made a decision to change their own future.

For others, Dr. Lieberman said, the moment had to do with athletics. One teen was recruited from his recreation center basketball team to a traveling city team, and had to lose weight to stay on the team. Another girl joined the track team. Her coach advised her to improve her eating habits and lose weight because she had the potential to be a fast runner.

A violent experience changed the life of the final weight decreaseer. He was almost “jumped,” and his grandfather then signed him up for a martial arts program at the local gym.

Transformative experiences also occurred in two teens who gained weight. One said his religious conversion allowed him to accept himself “as a big person.” Another teen learned she was a prediabetic, but wasn't able to make the changes necessary to lose weight.

Eight of the decreaseers consistently engaged in intense physical activity (at least 2 hours each day of team sports or weight lifting), compared with only one of the increasers. “The one increaser who exercised was on a dance team that served doughnuts after practice.”

The decreasing group reported that family members tried to positively influence their diet. The teens who increased their weight, however, reported that they received support to accept their weight, with their family using euphemisms (“You're thick, not fat”) and telling them they “looked fine just as they were.” ■