

Social Networks and Obesity¹

Kellie Cooper, Megan A. McVay, and LaToya J. O'Neal²

Do your family members, friends, or community play a role in how much you weigh? How can your relationships be used to help you reach your weight management goals? These are questions that have intrigued scientists for many years. In order to better manage your weight, it is important not only to know about diet and exercise, but also to learn more about other important factors that may affect weight.

What are social networks?

Social networks are defined as a group of individuals who are connected to each other through personal relationships (Degenne & Forsé, 1999). Social networks often form through common ground. This common ground could include relationships (such as having the same parents or friends), location (such as your town or neighborhood), or interests and goals. Your social network may include family members, friends, co-workers, or members of a church or community group. For some, social networks may also include relationships that occur online through social media or other websites and apps.



Figure 1. Social network.

Credits: GettyImages-1029144458

How are social networks and weight related?

Obesity is a medical condition characterized by the storing of excess body fat that may have a negative effect on health (World Health Organization, 2021). While many people assume that weight is only related to how much food you eat, how much you exercise, or what types of exercises you do, science has revealed that obesity is often more complicated than that. It is often a combination of things rather than a single factor that leads to excess weight. Other things that can contribute to obesity include genetics, age, gender, income, and the community where you live (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

1. This document is FCS3373, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date September 2022. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication.

2. Kellie Cooper, MS, Department of Health Education and Behavior; Megan A. McVay, PhD, Department of Health Education and Behavior; and LaToya J. O'Neal, PhD, assistant professor, Extension specialist, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

More recently, scientists have begun to investigate how social networks may be related to weight. Surprisingly, our relationships with other people may have more influence on our weight than we originally thought. There is strong evidence showing that relationships can provide resources and support that help us manage our weight well (Parham, 1993). However, it is also possible for our social relationships to make it harder to manage our weight or to stop us from managing our weight completely. One study found that having a friend who develops obesity makes you 57% more likely to develop obesity (Christakis & Fowler, 2007).

How might relationships support weight management?

Our relationships with others typically hold a very important place in our lives. Having a healthy network of family, friends, and co-workers is often mutually beneficial to all involved. These relationships provide you with companionship, support, advice, and a listening ear. Whether you are interested in losing weight, maintaining your current weight, or even gaining weight, relationships have a lot to offer that can help you reach your healthy weight goals.

Your social networks may provide you with helpful tips for staying on track with your weight management. This could include sharing doctor recommendations, healthy recipes, or advice for eating healthy and exercising. In addition to serving as a source for health information, the people in your social networks may also be important motivators in your weight management journey. Friends, family, and co-workers may provide encouragement that motivates you to keep working towards your goals. By sharing your weight management goals with those in your social network, you allow them the opportunity to check in with you and hold you accountable to meeting those goals. Lastly, individuals in your social network can offer you companionship. Having someone who is interested and willing to join in on your weight management efforts can make the journey more fun and all the more worthwhile.

How might relationships hinder weight management?

While your social networks can help you successfully manage your weight, there are also instances in which your relationships with others might hinder your efforts. One of the most common ways for this to happen is through social norms. Social norms are the unwritten rules of what is acceptable or unacceptable within a group (Hechter & Opp, 2001). We often use social norms to form strong, positive

relationships with those around us. However, social norms may also cause you to feel pressured to compromise your goals in order to fit in with others or avoid confrontation. In some cultures, it is socially unacceptable to refuse food that is offered. In other cultures, it is socially unacceptable to not finish all of the food on your plate. Sometimes, you conform to social norms without even realizing it. For example, you may attend a party and eat more than you normally would because the people around you are eating more. Some social norms are obvious, while others may be harder to spot. If you find that certain social norms are hindering your ability to manage your weight, try expressing your concerns to a trusted family member or friend. Ask them to encourage you to keep striving for your weight management goals, even if this means going against the norm.

Social undermining is another way in which relationships can hinder your weight management efforts. Social undermining is any social interaction that tempts you to engage in unhealthy behaviors or discourages you from engaging in healthy behaviors (Wang et al., 2014). Social undermining can be obvious or subtle, and may or may not be intentional. Examples of social undermining could include a family member, friend, or colleague offering you unhealthy foods, refusing to eat the healthy foods you prepare, or discouraging exercise. One of the best ways that you can respond to social undermining is by communicating openly with those in your social network about your goals and any changes in your health behaviors. Because social undermining is often unintentional, the people in your social network may not realize that their comments or actions are negatively affecting your goals. It is important to approach conversations about undermining in a calm, non-accusing tone and with a listening and understanding ear.

Why does it matter?

Obesity and its related illnesses are leading causes of death in the United States and worldwide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Obesity is a health condition that can lead to other serious chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, liver disease, arthritis, and some forms of cancer (World Health Organization, 2021). Obesity may also cause you to have trouble sleeping or breathing difficulties. Living with these chronic conditions can carry mental, emotional, and financial burdens. However, obesity is often treatable and preventable when addressed using the appropriate resources and knowledge. It is important to leverage resources, such as

social networks, to help you manage your weight and live a healthy lifestyle.

Put Your Relationships and Resources to Work for You

There are many ways that your relationships with others can be used to help improve your health as well as the health of those around you.



Figure 2. Healthy lifestyle supports.
Credits: GettyImages-499154924

Talk to family members and friends.

Try talking to your family members and friends about your weight management goals. Expressing your desire to live a healthy lifestyle will allow them to be prepared to support you along your journey. You may ask them to help you by going grocery shopping for healthy food items, by sharing healthy recipes that they come across, or by starting a vegetable garden with you. You could also invite them to join you by encouraging them to set their own goals or create an exercise schedule. Having this conversation with them may also get them thinking about creating a healthier lifestyle for themselves.

Contact your local UF/IFAS Extension office.

The University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) includes many people in different fields who deliver knowledge to improve the quality of life of Florida communities. UF/IFAS offers a variety of resources, such as weight management programs, a statewide walking program, and more, to support you on your health journey. Contact your local UF/IFAS Extension office for more

information regarding in-person events, videos, and other food and nutrition resources.

Research other relevant resources.

Social media communities can be a good source of support for weight management. There are many online groups that may provide scientific information, recipes, motivational stories, and advice that could help you in your weight management journey. This is also a great way to make new, supportive friends. Try searching for a weight management support group online to aid you in your journey.

Your primary care doctor may also be a good source of support for weight management. Be sure to check with your doctor before you start any significant lifestyle changes, and if you have any questions about the advice you receive online or from other resources. Your doctor can give you information about how to start your weight management journey safely and hold you accountable to your goals.

Summary

Social networks play a very important part in successful weight management. At times your social network may hinder you from meeting your weight loss goals by pressuring you to follow the norm, or by undermining your goals. However, your family, friends, and co-workers often want to encourage you and see you at your best. Try talking to individuals in your social network about your weight management goals, and invite them to join you on your journey!

References

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). Adult Obesity Causes & Consequences. Accessed on September 21, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/adult/causes.html>
- Christakis, N. A., & Fowler, J. H. (2007). The Spread of Obesity in a Large Social Network over 32 Years. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 357(4), 370–379. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMsa066082>
- Degenne, A., & Forsé, M. (1999). *Introducing Social Networks*. Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849209373>
- Finkelstein, E. A., Trogon, J. G., Cohen, J. W., & Dietz, W. (2009). Annual Medical Spending Attributable to Obesity: Payer- and Service-Specific Estimates: Amid calls for health reform, real cost savings are more likely to be achieved through reducing obesity and related risk factors. *Health*

Affairs, 28(Suppl1), w822–w831. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.28.5.w822>

Hechter, M., & Opp, K.-D. (2001). *Social Norms*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Parham, E. S. (1993). Enhancing Social Support in Weight Loss Management Groups. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 93(10), 1152–1158. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0002-8223\(93\)91648-A](https://doi.org/10.1016/0002-8223(93)91648-A)

Wang, M. L., Pbert, L., & Lemon, S. C. (2014). Influence of Family, Friend and Coworker Social Support and Social Undermining on Weight Gain Prevention among Adults. *Obesity*, 22(9), 1973–1980. <https://doi.org/10.1002/oby.20814>

World Health Organization. (2021). Obesity and Overweight. Accessed on September 21, 2021. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/obesity-and-overweight>