

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

How "Helping" Someone Lose Weight Might Actually Not Help

from the American Counseling Association

It's a certainty that the number one resolution again this year will be about weight loss. While it's a good resolution it's not an easy one to accomplish. And that's why friends and family are often very eager to jump in and "help."

Unfortunately, a great deal of the help offered actually can have an opposite effect. The wrong approach in trying to assist someone in losing weight can sometimes instead result in adding additional pounds.

Why? Because when the person being "helped" begins to feel targeted with negative messages, a series of destructive feelings can be triggered. When someone is constantly reminded he or she is overweight and needs your help, it can leave him or her feeling ugly, hopeless and unlovable simply because of those pounds. Such negative emotions often will pull a person to the comforts of food or drink as a way to temporarily squash those feelings.

Seemingly innocuous help, like simply reminding someone to eat healthier, can feel like nagging. Other less-than-helpful actions include buying the person exercise equipment, offering multiple suggestions of new diets, or trying to act as the food police. Spouses will often try to "help" by controlling or restricting what can or can't be eaten. Other non-helpful actions include focusing on the person's weight through constant health warnings and updates, or suggesting how easy it will be to lose weight because it's simply "a matter of willpower."

So what really does help? One starting point is simply to encourage the person you wish to help to talk about his or her feelings. Let them identify any negative messages you may have been sending and also try to respond to negative feelings they may have. If the person says he or she feels ugly because of being overweight, focus on all the aspects of his or her beauty as a whole person, and be sure that you're giving sincere, positive messages.

Another way to help is to set an example. Try to eat healthier yourself, skip that extra dessert and, after a time, begin a simple exercise program and invite the other person to join in.

Weight loss is never easy. Do offer your love and support, but in many cases there may be emotional or psychological issues contributing to the problem. That may be when a professional counselor can offer help that really will make a difference.

Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcornet@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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