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Published
2008

Journal Title
Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition

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Concurrent Session 10: Behavioural Nutrition

A mixed methods investigation of weight loss trial dietary adherence within a self determination theory framework

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Background – Dietary adherence is a significant issue in treating obesity and prevention of heart disease using energy-restricted diets. Such diets are efficacious in short-term trials in controlled environments, but are not effective in longer term community based settings due to drop out and poor dietary adherence. Identification of patients most likely to adhere to treatment diets represents a cost-effective way to use this treatment modality. This study applied self determination theory (SDT) to investigate adherence in an Australian setting in a monounsaturated enriched weight loss diet trial.

Objective – To investigate dietary adherence in a weight loss trial using a SDT framework.

Design – Non adhering and adhering participants were interviewed about their dietary adherence motivations between one to three months in their weight loss trial involvement. Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Results were integrated with quantitative demographic data and SDT health measures within a concurrent transformative mixed methods research design.

Outcomes – A number of themes related to the SDT framework developed and personal dietary adherence. Adherence themes reflecting both individual aspects and trial aspects were present. For example, ‘autonomous practitioner support’ in the SDT framework included themes of positive nutritionist, doesn’t reprimand, praises and encourages, listens and comes up with new suggestion as important for adherence. Not all themes fitted within the SDT framework. In future, tailoring of the framework to include these will be needed, so it reflects more accurately dietary adherence. Quantitative tools contributed additional information about the presence of SDT framework aspects.

Conclusion – These SDT adherence findings give information that can be used for practical enhancement of dietary adherence in weight loss interventions. There is potential to use these themes to predict adherers when recruiting to enhance the cost effectiveness of weight loss interventions.