



PROMOTING WEIGHT LOSS SUCCESSFULLY

Understanding Factors That Affect Behavior Change



The ability to achieve or maintain a healthy weight is often attributed to actions like exercise and dietary changes, but successful weight loss also includes psychological aspects such as understanding incentives and barriers. When working with Sailors, Marines, and other beneficiaries on weight loss, it is important to consider what impacts an individual's thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors. Below are some key factors that affect behavior change and how they can serve as an incentive or a barrier to weight loss. Use these tips and recommendations to help address the barriers to help beneficiaries successfully and safely lose weight.

KNOWLEDGE includes factual information on how the problem is acquired, addressed, or prevented.

- **Incentive:** "I know I need to burn more calories than I take in to lose weight."
- **Barrier:** "I know I'm supposed to do 150 minutes of exercise per week. I wonder if I can just hit the gym hard for a few hours on Saturday and knock it all out at once?"
- **Recommendation:** Provide concise, clear information in a format that best matches the user's learning style (printed material, online resources, verbal instruction, etc.).

PERCEIVED RISK is defined as a feeling of vulnerability or invulnerability to a health problem.

- **Incentive:** "My mom is only in her 40s and is already having medical problems because of her weight. I don't want to go through that; I better start taking care of myself now."
- **Barrier:** "I'm too young to get heart disease. I'll stop eating fast food when I'm old enough to worry about my blood pressure and cholesterol."
- **Recommendation:** Personalize risk based on the individual's characteristics and situation.

PERCEIVED CONSEQUENCES are what one believes will happen, either positive or negative, as a result of performing the new behavior.

- **Incentive:** "If I begin eating healthier and exercising more, maybe I won't be so stressed every physical fitness assessment cycle."
- **Barrier:** "Between my job and standing watch, I already feel like I don't get to spend much time with my family. When am I going to fit in exercise as well?"
- **Recommendation:** Emphasize the positive aspects of changing behavior, but do not ignore the potential barriers. Encouraging individuals to think about how they will address challenges early on can help avoid unpleasant surprises or setbacks down the road.



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ACCESS is the existence, affordability, and accessibility of services or products to support a particular behavior.

- ▶ **Incentive:** “Having the fitness center right on base makes it much easier to get workouts in before or after work.”
- ▶ **Barrier:** “Being stationed at a satellite location so far outside of town makes shopping for healthy foods really difficult. There is only one small grocery store in town and they do not offer many produce options.”
- ▶ **Recommendation:** Identify and acknowledge lack of access to healthy foods, safe places to exercise, and social support. Know what local resources are available to service members and their families to assist in brainstorming potential solutions.

SKILLS are the abilities (physical, verbal, or social) necessary to perform a particular behavior.

- ▶ **Incentive:** “It will be much easier to get a workout in now that the trainer showed me exercises I can do at home.”
- ▶ **Barrier:** “I’m not sure how to ask my wife to start cooking healthier meals. I don’t want her to think that I don’t like her cooking, or that I’m not grateful that she is making dinner.”
- ▶ **Recommendation:** Provide individuals with training in healthy cooking and physical fitness, if qualified, or refer them to another professional. Take the time to build verbal and social skills by rehearsing difficult conversations they may encounter.

SELF-EFFICACY is the belief or confidence that one can do a particular behavior.

- ▶ **Incentive:** “Petty Officer Smith also has kids at home and a busy work schedule, and he has been exercising before work for six months straight. If he can do it, so can I.”
- ▶ **Barrier:** “I try every physical fitness assessment cycle to lose weight. I’m starting to think I just can’t do it.”
- ▶ **Recommendation:** Work with the individual to set short-term attainable goals, build knowledge and skills, and avoid negative self-talk.

ATTITUDES describe general thoughts and inclination toward current or new behaviors.

- ▶ **Incentive:** “I am looking forward to exercising more. I always feel better when I do, and I love to get outside.”
- ▶ **Barrier:** “Time for another diet. Bring on the bland foods!”
- ▶ **Recommendation:** Work to understand how the individual feels about weight loss (positive, negative, or neutral thoughts). Focus on the positive thoughts.

PERCEIVED SOCIAL NORMS are what a person believes that other people or groups important to him/her expect of him/her.

- ▶ **Incentive:** “All of my friends are bugging me to get healthier. They do seem to have fun going to the exercise classes together, and the bike ride they are doing this weekend sounds a lot more fun than what I have planned. Maybe I should start joining them.”
- ▶ **Barrier:** “I want to start going to the gym, but I feel like you have to be in shape before you even start. People are going to get annoyed if I can’t keep up or don’t know what I’m doing.”
- ▶ **Recommendation:** Encourage the individual to ask those close to them to support their efforts. Also suggest they attempt to engage with people and groups where healthy behaviors are the norm, such as exercise classes, running clubs, and healthy cooking classes.

For more information about [weight management](#), [healthy eating](#), and [active living](#), visit the Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center [Health Promotion and Wellness Department](#).

