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Obesity Expert: Blame Policies

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Three decades ago, Kelly Brownell was convinced he could help people lose weight and even developed a diet plan that is still in wide use today.

Now the director of Yale University's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, he believes the billions of dollars Americans spend annually on dieting are a waste. Existing weight loss treatments - including his own - "stink," Brownell said.

Brownell, a psychologist by training, has emerged as a leader in a national drive to change food policy in the United States. If you want to lower galloping obesity rates, he said, you have to stop making junk food attractive, readily available and affordable to children.

Brownell coined the phrase "toxic food environment" to describe the calorie-rich world he wants to change. It is a national landscape peppered with jumbo fries and marketing campaigns designed to make kids go cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs.

It is preserved, he said, by politicians who habitually vote for things like corn subsidies that make the least healthy foods - often flavored with corn syrup - the cheapest to buy.

So if you don't change food policy, people will keep getting fatter and sicker, and no diet or exercise program in the world will change that, Brownell said.

His advocacy of sweeping policy change, such as his promotion of the so-called Twinkie tax on junk food - and his own substantial girth - has made him an object of derision to conservative critics who say weight is purely a matter of personal responsibility.

But Brownell said if the country is serious about tackling obesity, you can't count on individual willpower. "For every person who manages to lose a lot of weight, you will have a thousand new obese people," he said.

So what changed the psychologist's mind about ways to tackle obesity?

"I can answer that in one word: `relapse,'" Brownell said.

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Dieting Failures

In the mid-1970s, when Brownell began his career at Rutgers University, he showed that dieters who had social support tended to lose more weight than those who did not.

In a short time, however, his subjects gained the weight back.

Later, he was involved in research that showed people who had social support and took the drug fenfluramine lost even more weight initially. But, again, most of these subjects gained the pounds back over time.

Then, in the early 1980s, he studied people who were placed on a severe diet of only 800 calories. And during that study he met a woman named Jane. Despite being on a severely restrictive diet, Jane hardly lost any weight - and other researchers suspected Jane was lying about what she ate.

"But," Brownell said, "I believed her."

Brownell began wondering if Jane's body somehow viewed weight loss as a threat and had somehow learned to counteract the effects of her own dieting.

Brownell's theory of weight cycling - or, more popularly, yo-yo dieting - was born. The theory is that the more times you go back to a diet, the more difficult it is to reduce weight. And experiments with animals show that is exactly what happens, Brownell said.

It was a pattern Brownell encountered again and again in years of clinical research. You can get people to lose weight, but most will gain all of it back - if not more.

So Brownell was not surprised this spring by the disappointing results of a study comparing popular diet plans - including the one he created nearly 30 years ago.

The LEARN diet, which has gone through many editions over the years, integrates the best thinking on weight loss, Brownell said. It features nutritional education, enlists the support of professionals and family to maintain behavioral changes, and stresses the need for exercise and eating a balanced diet low in fat and high in fruits and vegetables.

Essentially, the LEARN diet is the same formula still espoused by most nutritional experts today.

But in the study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, the LEARN diet helped overweight and obese women lose an average of just 5.7 pounds a year - far less than the 10 pounds lost by women on the controversial low-carbohydrate Atkins diet.

And, on each of the diets, women lost weight initially but nearly all began to regain weight after six months. After a full year, the women on average lost only between 2 percent and 5 percent of their body weight.

The propensity for relapse is familiar to Brownell, whose struggle with weight over the years has left him sporting a substantial midsection today.

"I have an extremely busy schedule, and I know that food can be a comfort when you are under stress," Brownell said. "I realize that it takes tremendous restraint and willpower to keep your weight down."

Nurture, Not Nature

One example after another convinced Brownell that willpower alone is not enough.

That the only way to fight fat is to stop it before it appears.

"No one at the time was talking about the prevention of obesity. The focus was 100 percent on treatment," he said.

Although obesity was hardly on the nation's radar in the late 1980s, he began to talk to public health officials who were becoming alarmed that Americans were becoming substantially fatter. Brownell wanted to know why.

His conclusions have been at the center of a growing national debate over food - from whether trans fats should be served in restaurants to snack food in schools. Brownell believes the chief culprit is the trillion-dollar food industry, which Brownell said has stayed profitable through massive advertising campaigns to get people to eat more calories than they need.

The evidence is everywhere, Brownell said, from super-size fast food meals to jumbo Coca-Colas. As portion sizes ballooned, so did waistlines of people who exercised less and less over the years.

Meanwhile, the government has fueled the obesity epidemic by granting subsidies to farmers that helped create cheap feed for cows, greasy oils and sweeteners to create countless empty calories in our diets, he said.

Food economics make it cheaper to buy a Happy Meal than a salad. Why is it, he said, that you get a price break the bigger the fries or soft drink you order, but there is no break when you buy six apples instead of three?

Why not create food subsidies for apples, oranges or broccoli instead of corn?

Changing those economics is why Brownell argued for a tax on snack food, although he also says the government could subsidize production of healthy fresh foods, which are either unavailable or unaffordable in many urban areas, which are experiencing the greatest growth in obesity.

Brownell's ideas have started to take root in states like Connecticut, which has adopted rules banning the sale of soda in school and offered incentives to schools to offer healthier food choices.

At the Rudd Center, he has lawyers looking into how to restrain advertising of junk food to children and has even launched discussions on whether some foods may be addicting - and, therefore, potentially subject to greater regulation.

Proposals like those raise the ire of both libertarians and the food industry.

"We have the same goals, but we differ on the best ways to reach those goals," said Sheila Weiss, director of nutrition policy for the National Restaurant Association. "Too often, we hear ideas that are just not workable for the food and restaurant industries."

For instance, she said restaurants are working to eliminate trans fats, "but we simply need more time." Also, many restaurants are offering options of smaller portion sizes to meet public demand.

Food taxes are "regressive, arbitrary and inefficient" and end up hurting the poor economically, said Robert Earl, senior director of nutrition policy of the Grocery Manufacturers Association. Earl, too, said public demand is leading to less food advertising geared to children and increased information on healthy food choices.

Even allies like Dr. David Katz, director and co-founder of the Yale Prevention Research Center, who applaud Brownell's push for sweeping food policy changes, do not agree that people are powerless over their food environment.

"Once empowered to make healthy food choices, I would say that at the end of the day it is up to each individual what they do with their feet and their forks," Katz said.

Brownell acknowledges that there are other causes of obesity other than junk food marketing and larger portion sizes. And also that, in the unlikely event every one of his policy changes were adopted, in a land of plenty there will still always be obesity.

"I am 100 percent sure that the causes of obesity are environmental," he said. "We are just not sure what all those environmental causes are."

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