

SOCIETY *of* BEHAVIORAL MEDICINE

Better Health Through Behavior Change

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Social Support for Weight Loss: Online Friends Versus Real Friends

San Francisco, CA - People seem to be flocking to Twitter to “tweet” about their weight loss journey. One recent study even showed that tweeting about your weight loss journey can actually lead to more weight loss. But why? Twitter is an online social network in which people connect based on a shared interest, rather than a pre-existing relationship as is the case with Facebook.

Knowing that social support is a key factor in weight loss motivation, Dr. Sherry Pagoto surveyed a sample of 79 people who tweet about their weight loss to find out what type of support they get from their Twitter friends relative to their Facebook friends, their in-person friends, and their family.

Dr. Pagoto will present the study at a symposium at 2:00 p.m. Pacific Time on Thursday, March 21, 2013 during the Society of Behavioral Medicine’s 34th Annual Meeting & Scientific Sessions in San Francisco, CA.

Who’s tweeting their pounds away?

Of the 79 people who responded to the tweeted survey, 82% were female and the average age was 35 years old, with a range from 21-57, which shows that tweeting away the pounds is not just for the young. On average these “tweeters” lost 35 pounds since they started their weight loss journey.

What kind of support do “tweeters” get from their Twitter friends relative to other friends and family?

Participants said they reported to feel significantly more comfortable discussing weight on Twitter relative to Facebook ($p=.00$), family ($p=.00$), in-person friends ($p=.00$), and even people they interacted with on weight loss specific online social networks. They also reported receiving significantly more information from Twitter relative to Facebook ($p=.00$), online weight loss networks ($p=.01$), family ($p=.00$) and friends ($p=.00$), and more support from both Twitter and weight loss networks than the other 3 groups ($p's<.01$).

Is there negative energy on Twitter?

It doesn’t appear so. Participants rated their Twitter and online weight loss network friends as significantly less judgmental than Facebook, family and friends ($p's<.01$). They also reported

feeling the least embarrassed about their weight struggles when it comes to their Twitter and online weight loss network friends relative to Facebook, family, and friends ($p's < .01$). In fact, family ranked as having the most negative energy of all the categories.

“On Twitter, people connect to each other based on common interests so they may be able to find ‘kindred spirits’ more easily than on Facebook or even in their in-person networks,” says Dr. Pagoto.

“Just because someone is your longtime friend or family member doesn’t mean they support or understand your weight loss journey. In our outpatient-based weight loss program at the University of Massachusetts Memorial Medical Center, we so often hear patients reporting a lack of support from their family and friends and this is a huge source of frustration on the weight loss journey. Online social networks on Twitter that allow you to find people who are on the same journey may provide the needed social support to keep that motivation going. That “tweeters” lost 35 pounds on average is pretty impressive. I now recommend Twitter to all my patients.”

The Society of Behavioral Medicine (www.sbm.org) is a multidisciplinary organization of clinicians, educators, and scientists dedicated to promoting the study of the interactions of behavior with biology and the environment and the application of that knowledge to improve the health and well being of individuals, families, communities and populations.

This study was presented during the 2013 Annual Meeting & Scientific Sessions of the Society of Behavioral Medicine (SBM) from March 20-23 in San Francisco, CA. However, it does not reflect the policies or the opinion of the SBM.

Given that this study was presented at a scientific meeting, the data and conclusions reached should be regarded as preliminary, until they are published in a peer-reviewed journal. Funding agencies played no role in this study. There are no conflicts of interest for the investigators.

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