

**Wollersheim J P.** Effectiveness of group therapy based upon learning principles in the treatment of overweight women. *J. Abnormal Psychol.* 76:462-74, 1970.  
[University of Illinois, Urbana, IL]

This study evaluated the effectiveness of a behavior therapy group treatment program in helping overweight college women lose weight. The design of the study and the highly positive results established a cause-effect relationship between the treatment program and weight loss. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI®) indicates that this paper has been cited in over 155 publications since 1970.]

Janet P. Wollersheim  
Department of Psychology  
University of Montana  
Missoula, MT 59812

February 8, 1964

"Being a graduate student of Gordon L. Paul,<sup>1</sup> I was interested in treatment outcome research as a dissertation topic. In 1967, when I conceived of the study, behavior therapy was beginning to receive much attention as a set of treatment procedures in clinical psychology. I wanted to conduct a treatment study using these procedures together with an index of change that was objective, valid, and easily measured. At this same time, as a graduate student in clinical psychology, I was treating clients in the psychology department's clinic as part of my training requirements. One of these clients was extremely obese. It occurred to me that body weight would be an objective, valid, and easily measured dependent variable in a treatment study focused upon reducing obesity.

"After designing the study, I feared I might not obtain enough subjects to volunteer in response to an announcement of the program's availability in the university newspaper and on bulletin boards. Much to my surprise, not only did many overweight

women seek entrance into the program, but so did a large number of normal weight and underweight women. This was the era of Twiggy, the anorexic-looking model of the 1960s. I came to appreciate more fully how much our society had come to value the trim figure.

"Several thoughts occur to me as to why the study has been so widely cited. While my work expanded and modified behavior therapy weight reduction procedures published by Ferster, Nurnberger, and Levitt,<sup>2</sup> and by Goldiamond,<sup>3</sup> it was the first group psychotherapy study concerning weight reduction designed with the controls necessary to establish cause-effect relationships between therapeutic techniques and treatment outcome. The results were among the most favorable reported in the weight reduction literature, a literature characterized by poorly designed research and extremely discouraging results. This work helped extend the applicability of behavioral principles to a new problem area, that of obesity. Additionally, the treatment package was specified in detail in a manual<sup>4</sup> which has been used extensively by others in the field.

"Reflecting upon this work, I often wonder why another study<sup>5</sup> reporting a longer follow-up period with these subjects is not cited more often. Then, too, although I believe that this publication was among the first coining the term, 'cognitive-behavioral,' later publications are credited with devising the term. Perhaps my article was not written in such a way as to highlight usage of this new term. I tend to think that publication of this work was one important factor involved in my being awarded Fellow status in the American Psychological Association in 1980.

"Today, we know that behavior therapy procedures are effective in promoting weight loss if implemented. The major problem revolves around motivating clients to initiate such programs, maintain them, and suffer the hardships of caloric restriction. A book edited by Wolman and DeBerry<sup>6</sup> is one of several covering more recent work in the area."

1. Paul G L. *Insight vs. desensitization in psychotherapy: an experiment in anxiety reduction.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966. 148 p. (Cited 600 times.)
2. Ferster C B, Nurnberger J I & Levitt E B. The control of eating. *J. Mathetics* 1:87-109, 1962. (Cited 170 times.)
3. Goldiamond I. Self-control procedures in personal behavior problems. *Psychol. Rep.* 17:851-68, 1965. (Cited 130 times.)
4. Wollersheim J P. Obesity: behavioral treatment manuals. *Catalogue of selected documents in psychology.* Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1975. Vol. 5. p. 237.
5. .... Follow-up of behavioral group therapy for obesity. *Behav. Ther.* 8:966-8, 1977.
6. Wolman B B & DeBerry S, eds. *Psychological aspects of obesity: a handbook.* New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1982. 318 p.