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## Mind-Body Solutions for Obesity

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Obesity has risen to epidemic levels globally. In 2005, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that approximately 1.6 billion adults were overweight and at least 400 million adults (9.8% of the world's population) were obese. By 2015, WHO estimates that approximately 2.3 billion adults will be overweight and more than 700 million will be obese.<sup>1</sup>

Defined as body mass index equal to or greater than 30, obesity accounts for rising rates of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, musculoskeletal disorders, and certain types of cancers. Diet and exercise are often identified as the primary risk-reduction strategies. Yet obesity is a complex problem, driven by physiological, environmental, social, economic, and behavioral factors.<sup>1</sup>

Simplistic plans to modify diet and exercise alone often fail to bring about lasting weight reduction or viable long-term solutions. Complementary and alternative therapies offer strategies that providers can use in combination with diet and exercise to increase success and outcome sustainability. Mind-body therapies—such as guided imagery, relaxation, hypnosis, biofeedback, yoga, qi gong, and meditation, which all influence thought, emotion, and mental imaging—may be particularly helpful; research suggests that they enhance weight reduction through portion awareness and self-monitoring, satiation and satisfaction awareness, and stress reduction.

### Specific Mind-body Strategies for Weight Loss

Mindfulness, defined as a concentrated awareness of one's thoughts, actions, and motivations, may play an essential role in long-term weight loss. Many commercial health and wellness spas use a form of mindfulness or intuitive eating as a foundation for their weight loss programs. Kristeller et al are conducting tests funded by the National Institutes of Health/National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NIH/NCCAM) of mindfulness exercises that alert a person to cues of hunger and satiation, selection and portion decisions, tastes and textures of particular foods, and the act and moment of eating and swallowing.<sup>2</sup> Preliminary studies indicated this approach reduced bingeing and increased self-control of food and food choices. They posit that mindfulness increases psychological and physiological self-regulation, heightens awareness of self-control and healthy functioning, increases awareness of automatic behavioral patterns, and helps people purposefully and successfully disengage from undesirable aspects.<sup>2</sup> Intervention strategies vary and include exercises that focus on feelings associated with hunger, the process of taking in singular pieces of food (such as a raisin) and letting that food dissolve completely without chewing, and eating slowly and increasing awareness of the bodily and emotional sensations during that process. The Center for Mindful Eating (<http://www.tcme.org/library.htm>) provides additional resources for professionals.

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Meditation is also helpful for weight. Closely aligned with mindfulness, meditation is defined as any activity that keeps the attention pleasantly anchored in the present moment. NIH/NCCAM identifies many types of meditation, the purposes of which are to control attention and focus the mind beyond thinking and cognition to a deeper state of consciousness. Meditation is believed to reduce stress and promote relaxation, which may down-regulate the physiological stress/endocrine processes associated with obesity.

Qi gong is a therapy that combines movement, meditation, and regulation of breathing to enhance the flow of universal energy (qi or ch'i) through the body. Proponents suggest that qi gong cultivates "self knowing" and helps regulate energy leading to improved digestion, increased metabolism, and weight loss. While recent clinical trial results found that qi gong had limited effects on initial weight loss, the therapy was significantly more helpful than others in the prevention of weight "regain." Researchers noted that it requires patients to invest significant amounts of time and effort to realize weight loss.<sup>3</sup> Thus, qi gong may be of benefit to patients who constantly battle their weight, but providers should alert patients of the commitment required for positive results. While many claim hypnosis as a successful intervention for weight loss, little evidence supports this. A systematic literature review conducted by Vanderbilt University concluded that studies showing weight loss as a result of hypnosis alone are few and suffer from serious methodological errors. However, the literature does support the use of hypnosis combined with a behavioral weight-management program. In those cases, weight loss was low to moderate but effectively maintained. In combination therapy, hypnosis provided short-term reinforcement of positive eating habits and food intake patterns.<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Stephen Gurgevich notes that hypnosis reinforces motivation, self-discipline, and willpower necessary for weight loss. Cautioning that hypnosis is no silver bullet, he claims that the suggestions offered during hypnosis can help people change their behavior and attitudes about eating, physical activity, shopping for food, and restaurant dining. According to Gurgevich, hypnosis can "remove psychological obstacles to weight loss and strengthen the ego, as well as encourage changes in body image, metabolism, and the body's set point (its comfortable weight)."<sup>5</sup> If contemplating the use of hypnotherapy, patients should be referred to appropriately credentialed therapists, identified at [www.asch.net](http://www.asch.net).

## Conclusion

Healthcare providers, including nurse practitioners, need to be aware of the myriad of mind-body weight loss strategies that fill the internet. Many claim to offer an option for "natural" weight loss. Patients should be counseled that while these therapies are seldom harmful, there is little evidence to support the use of mind-body modes as a single effective treatment for weight loss. There is, however, a growing body of literature that suggests mind-body strategies support and enhance a multi-modal weight loss program that focuses on lifestyle changes of diet, exercise, reduced stress, and mindful living.

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