

Partner Facilitation and Partner Interference in Individuals' Weight Loss Goals

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Abstract

Drawing on the logic of the relational turbulence model, this study examined the ways in which romantic partners facilitate and interfere with individuals' weight loss goals. Participants ($N = 122$) described the ways in which their romantic partner had recently helped or hindered their weight loss at four times over the course of 2 months. We conducted a content analysis of responses to identify themes of partner facilitation (Research Question 1 [RQ1]) and partner interference (RQ2) in individuals' weight loss goals. Results revealed seven themes of partner facilitation: (a) partner enabling diet, (b) motivation and encouragement, (c) emotional support and positive reinforcement, (d) exercising together, (e) partner enabling exercise, (f) dieting together, and (g) relationship influence and priorities. Four themes of partner interference emerged in the data: (a) inability to plan for healthy meals, (b) inability to control the food environment, (c) preventing or discouraging exercise, and (d) emotional or relational discouragement.

Keywords

communication; content analysis; longitudinal studies; obesity / overweight; relationships; weight management; qualitative

More than two thirds of adults in the United States are overweight or obese (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2014). Although 51% of Americans say they would like to lose weight, only 25% say they are seriously working toward that goal (Brown, 2013). Despite people's strong desire to lose weight, weight loss goals are notoriously elusive. Only 20% of people who set out to lose weight manage to lose at least 10% of their body weight and keep it off for at least 1 year, and even fewer of those people actually make it to their goal weight (Wing & Phelan, 2005). Why do people struggle to achieve their weight loss goals? Countless studies have investigated deficiencies in people's diets, exercise routines, genetics, and psyches as explanations for failure (e.g., Brown, 2013; Carels et al., 2008; Green, Larkin, & Sullivan, 2009), but relatively fewer studies have considered features of the social environment that may promote or inhibit weight loss (see Dailey, 2010; Homish & Leonard, 2008; Wing & Jeffrey, 1999). In particular, romantic relationship partners have a significant influence in people's lives and they can exert themselves in ways that may enhance or inhibit their partner's goals or routines. Thus, this study examines the ways that a romantic partner can influence people's weight loss efforts.

We draw on the logic of the relational turbulence model as a theoretical foundation for this study (Solomon

& Knobloch, 2001, 2004). The relational turbulence model identifies features of relational involvement that intensify people's reactions to relationship events. One of the mechanisms in the model highlights the degree of influence that romantic partners have on one another and argues that individuals can influence their partner in ways that either facilitate or interfere with personal goals (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004). Although tests of the relational turbulence model have typically focused on the effect that global perceptions of interference from partners have on people's emotional, cognitive, and communicative reactions to relationship circumstances (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Theiss & Knobloch, 2009; Theiss & Nagy, 2010; Theiss & Solomon, 2006), relatively few studies have considered the specific relationship conditions or partner behaviors that may give rise to perceptions of a partner's facilitation or interference (but see Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; Nagy & Theiss, 2013). When individuals have specific goals they are trying to attain, such as weight loss, a partner's influence on those

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goals is likely to be especially salient. Accordingly, in this study we consider sources of partner facilitation and partner interference in individuals' weight loss goals.

This study advances the literature in at least two significant ways. Theoretically, the current study advances the literature on the relational turbulence model by examining weight loss goals as a specific context where a partner's influence may be particularly recognizable. By bringing the features of a partner's influence into sharper focus, this study helps expand the explanatory power of the relational turbulence model. Pragmatically, this study helps to identify features of romantic relationships that may be an impediment to weight loss. Encouraging individuals to anticipate a romantic partner's involvement in their weight loss goals may help to prepare them for the inevitable triumphs and set-backs they encounter on the path toward their goal. In the sections that follow, we articulate the logic of the relational turbulence model and explain how weight loss goals are particularly susceptible to a partner's influence; then, we report the results of a study designed to assess the ways in which romantic partners facilitate and interfere with weight loss goals.

Romantic Partner Influence as a Mechanism of Relational Turbulence

The relational turbulence model is a model of relationship development that identifies characteristics of romantic relationships that give rise to turmoil during relationship transitions (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Solomon & Theiss, 2008; Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010). The model identifies two mechanisms that contribute to relational turbulence: relational uncertainty and interference from partners. Relational uncertainty refers to a lack of confidence in relationship perceptions stemming from self-focused, partner-focused, and relationship-focused sources of doubt (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Interference from partners is experienced as disruptions to personal goals and routines due to the influence of a romantic partner (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Although both mechanisms in the model have been linked to emotional, cognitive, and communicative markers of turbulence, relational uncertainty has received far more attention as a feature of relationships contributing to tumult (e.g., Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002, 2005; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011; Theiss, 2011). The nature and impact of interference from partners merits further examination.

The branch of the relational turbulence model that deals with interference from partners suggests that as partners become more intimate, they increase their interdependence, which creates opportunities for partners to have influence on one another's personal goals and routines (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). A partner's influence can

manifest in two forms: partner facilitation and partner interference (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). *Facilitation from partners* involves actions that would help a romantic partner accomplish his or her goals (e.g., "Thanks for buying fresh vegetables at the farmer's market so that we can plan some healthy meals this week."). *Interference from partners* involves actions that prevent a partner from performing a typical routine or accomplishing personal goals (e.g., "Why did you make those chocolate chip cookies? You know I'm on a diet!"). The relational turbulence model argues that partners are likely to experience heightened interference from partners during the early stages of relationships as they establish interdependence, but with experience and practice they should develop more coordinated patterns of action that enable greater facilitation (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004). Notably, empirical tests of the relational turbulence model have shown that interference from partners does not necessarily subside in more established relationships, rather it tends to steadily increase as couples negotiate their interdependence and then it plateaus across relatively high levels of intimacy (Solomon & Theiss, 2008). Thus, both partner interference and partner facilitation are likely to be salient experiences in the context of romantic relationships.

Conceptually, partner facilitation and partner interference have a very clear role in the logic of the relational turbulence model; however, they have been operationalized to focus on mundane sources of interruptions in day-to-day life (e.g., "My partner helps me to use my time well" or "My partner interferes with the things I need to do each day"; Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). We wonder whether partner facilitation and partner interference might be experienced differently when individuals are pursuing more specific and salient personal goals. In particular, this study focuses on individual weight loss goals as a context in which partners may behave in ways that support or undermine a healthy lifestyle.

A romantic partner's influence can be beneficial to the extent that it helps individuals to facilitate personal goals. In many ways, having a romantic partner can make it easier to accomplish certain tasks and execute daily routines because the partner can help out in direct and indirect ways. Prior research points to a variety of ways in which having a romantic partner encourages more positive health behaviors. For example, attempts at smoking cessation are more successful when individuals have a supportive and encouraging romantic partner (Cohen & Lichtenstein, 1990). In addition, college students in committed romantic relationships display fewer mental health problems and are less likely to be overweight or obese than college students who are not involved in romantic relationships (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010). Individuals in romantic relationships also report that their romantic partner influences their health by preparing healthy meals and

encouraging exercise (Markey, Markey, & Gray, 2007). Communication between romantic partners can also be influential in terms of promoting healthy behaviors related to weight loss. Romantic partners who convey messages that combine elements of acceptance of the partner's weight with elements of challenge to continue working toward their weight loss goals tend to motivate healthy weight loss behaviors (Dailey, Richards, & Romo, 2010). Increased social support in close relationships can also help individuals meet their weight management goals (Loving & Slatcher, 2013; Wing & Jeffrey, 1999). Taken together, this evidence suggests that there are a variety of ways in which romantic partners can positively influence health behavior. Guided by the mechanism of partner facilitation in the relational turbulence model, we advance the following research question to explore the ways in which romantic partners facilitate weight loss goals.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): In what ways, if any, do romantic partners facilitate or help in the achievement of weight loss goals?

A romantic partner's influence can also present barriers to adopting healthy behaviors and achieving weight loss goals. For example, individuals are more likely to smoke if they have a romantic partner who also smokes (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2008). Furthermore, individuals are more likely to hide their smoking when a romantic partner is attempting to control and curb their cigarette intake (Scholz et al., 2013). With regard to weight loss, romantic partners can interfere with weight loss goals by encouraging the co-consumption of unhealthy foods and persuading partners not to exercise (Markey et al., 2007). Individuals in mixed-weight couples (i.e., when one partner has a higher weight than the other) report greater interpersonal conflict than individuals in matched-weight couples due to increased scrutiny over food choices (Burke, Randall, Corkery, Young, & Butler, 2012). Even when a partner's actions are not intentionally tied to a specific health goal, simply coexisting as part of an interdependent couple can create circumstances that interfere with personal health goals (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Thus, the second research question in this study investigates the sources of partner influence that interfere with weight loss goals.

Research Question 2 (RQ2): In what ways, if any, do romantic partners interfere with or hinder the achievement of weight loss goals?

Method

To explore our research questions, we conducted a longitudinal web-based study in which participants completed

bi-weekly surveys over the course of 2 months reflecting on the ways in which their partner facilitates and interferes with their weight loss goals. Participants were recruited by posting announcements in online communities dedicated to weight loss (e.g., www.weightwatchers.com, www.myfitnesspal.com, www.sparkpeople.com). Individuals were eligible to participate in the study if they met the following criteria: (a) they were actively trying to lose weight, (b) they were involved in a monogamous romantic relationship, (c) they were living in the United States, (d) they were at least 18 years of age, and (e) they had access to an Internet connection. Participants received a \$10 gift card to Amazon.com for each survey they completed and a bonus \$10 gift card if they completed all four waves of the study.

Sample

Participants ($N = 122$) ranged in age from 19 to 65 years old ($M = 31$ years, $SD = 6.71$ years). The sample included 32% males and 68% females. The racial/ethnic make-up of the sample included White/Caucasian (90.8%), Asian (4.2%), Native American (4.2%), Black (1.7%), Hispanic (1.7%), and Other (2.5%). Participants categorized their relationship as casual dating partners (4.2%), serious dating partners (32.2%), engaged to be married (15.3%), married (44.9%), or domestic partners with no intention to marry (3.4%). Two participants did not report relationship type. Individuals were involved in their current romantic relationship for an average of 2.57 years (range = 1 month to 7.81 years; $SD = 1.81$ years). Respondents had been actively engaged in a weight loss plan for an average of 19.91 weeks prior to the start of the study (range = 0 weeks to 208 weeks, $SD = 33.19$ weeks) and reported a goal of losing an average of 58.96 pounds (range = 10 pounds to 332 pounds, $SD = 46.60$ pounds). At the time they began the study, participants had already lost an average of 17.06 pounds (range = 0 pounds to 147 pounds, $SD = 24.06$ pounds).

Procedure

Participants were instructed to email the first author to enroll in the study. The first author replied with a series of screening questions to determine the individual's eligibility for the study. After ensuring the participants met the eligibility criteria, they were sent a link to the survey and instructions to log in to the study using their email address and a unique password that was assigned to them. After data collection was complete, the email addresses and passwords were deleted from the data file to ensure anonymity of participants. Participants completed online surveys every other week for a period of 8 weeks to provide four waves of data about their weight

loss goals and their partner's influence in those goals. The researchers emailed each participant when it was time to complete the next wave of the study. Participants received instructions to complete the questionnaires at approximately the same time every 2 weeks to ensure that enough time had passed to capture changes in weight loss and relationship characteristics.

Measures

Participants responded to two open-ended questions designed to assess partner facilitation and partner interference in their weight loss goals. To evaluate partner facilitation (RQ1), participants were asked to, "Please describe the various things your partner has done in the past 2 weeks to *help* you achieve your weight loss goals." To evaluate partner interference (RQ2), participants were asked to, "Please describe the various things your partner has done in the past two weeks that made it difficult for you to achieve your weight loss goals. In other words, please describe how your partner *hindered* your weight loss goals."

Analysis

We conducted a content analysis of the open-ended data to identify themes of partner facilitation and partner interference in individuals' weight loss goals (Neuendorf, 2002). All of the open-ended responses for each question across all waves of the study were combined into a single data set for analysis. The first author trained two research assistants to identify themes in the data through an open and axial coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As a first step, the coders read through the entire data set to familiarize themselves with the responses. Then, the coders began the interpretive process of open and axial coding, which involves examining each individual unit of analysis, comparing common features across responses, and identifying overarching themes that characterize the data. During the open coding phase of the process, each coder read through the responses and independently created a list of topics that met the criteria of frequency and/or intensity. In other words, the coders were instructed to list any topic that was mentioned frequently across multiple respondents, or any topic that was discussed with clear passion or intensity by a smaller number of respondents. After each coder compiled a list of topics, the research team met with the first author to assess overlap between their perceptions and identify broader themes that encompass the various topics that emerged from the data. The team then took a final turn at the data to verify that the broader categories that had been identified sufficiently captured the diversity of issues that were reported in the data. This process yielded seven themes related to

facilitation/helping, and four themes related to interference/hindering.

The second goal of this analysis was to assess the frequency with which each theme was represented in the data. After the themes were identified, the first author created a coding manual with instructions for the coders to identify content that would fit into that particular theme. At the same time, the coders unitized each participant's response to each question into thematic units that conveyed a single thought or idea. The total sample of thematic units for the facilitation question was $N = 605$, and for the interference question was $N = 459$. The first author then trained two independent judges to code each unit of analysis into mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories as described in the coding manual. Cohen's κ was used to evaluate inter-coder reliability. The average inter-coder reliability across the first and second research questions was Cohen's $\kappa = .98$. Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Results

Themes of Partner Facilitation of Weight Loss Goals

The first research question asked about the ways in which romantic partners facilitate weight loss goals. Results of the theme analysis revealed seven themes related to partner facilitation of weight loss goals: (a) partner enabling diet (22.6% of cases), (b) motivation and encouragement (18.7%), (c) emotional support and positive reinforcement (16.9%), (d) exercising together (11.7%), (e) partner enabling exercise (10.2%), (f) dieting together (9.8%), and (g) relationship influence and priorities (3.5%). In 12.9% of cases, individuals indicated that their partner did nothing to facilitate their weight loss goals.

Partner enabling diet. The first theme referenced the partner's efforts to make it easier for participants to maintain their diet (22.6% of thematic codes). This included suggestions about dietary recommendations and the partner's involvement and participation in making changes to the couple's diet. One participant (female, age 24, in a serious dating relationship) stated her partner purposefully made healthy choices that benefited her.

He is actively health conscious and aware that I prefer to eat foods that contain little to no grains and high amounts of vegetables. He provides these foods for me and is willing to follow the dietary habits that I follow in order to support weight loss.

Another participant (female, age 26, in a serious dating relationship) noted, "He enjoys cooking more than I do, so he tends to cook healthier meals when we're

together. When we're apart, I gravitate more towards eating out." A few participants noted that their partner had expertise about nutrition and weight loss that helped them maintain a healthy diet, such as one respondent's (male, age 37, married) spouse who was a nutritionist, "She has a degree in nutrition, so she often reminds me to eat small amounts throughout the day to keep my body burning calories." Individuals also mentioned that their partners tried to keep healthy food options in the house to aid in weight loss efforts. Along these lines, one participant (female, age 50, married) stated, "He listens to me when I discuss my diet. He buys low fat/low salt ingredients when he's cooking. He doesn't try to tell me what to do or how to do it." Another participant (female, 20, engaged) stated, "He does most of the grocery shopping and food preparation, and he makes sure that there are always healthy, pre-measured snacks available in our house, like a serving of almonds or one-ounce cheese sticks." One participant went so far as to say, "My boyfriend goes far and beyond to help me every day with my diet. He keeps better track of my [Weight Watchers] points than I do" (female, 38, in a serious dating relationship). Thus, many respondents reported that their partner facilitated their weight loss goals by helping them maintain a healthy diet.

Motivation and encouragement. The second theme referenced motivation and encouragement from partners (18.7% of thematic units). Partners motivated respondents to go to the gym, encouraged them to eat healthier, gave advice about how to lose weight, or provided tangible gifts or resources to support weight loss efforts. One participant (female, age 24, in a serious dating relationship) discussed her need for the extra motivation to exercise:

In the past two weeks, he has been helpful in getting me to go to the gym. Whenever I'm leaving work and am not sure if I should go or not, I call him and ask him to convince me to go. Sometimes I just need that extra push and he's really great about it.

Another participant (female, age 19, in a serious dating relationship) received encouragement to exercise from her partner, "He encouraged me to start lifting weights again. He knows I was intimidated by the big, beefy guys in the gym, but he kept encouraging me to do it." In addition, one participant stated, "He also holds me accountable for my nutritional and fitness goals for the day by asking whether or not I have completed my daily run and asking if I stayed within my goals for calories for the day" (female, 22, in a serious dating relationship). Partners also offered support by providing information and alternatives to help weight loss goals. One participant

(female, age 24, in serious dating relationship) stated, "In addition to suggesting a new and affordable gym membership, he has helped come up with healthy and low-calorie substitutes for foods we usually enjoy. He has even gone low-to-no carb (wheat) with me to be supportive." Another participant (male, age 26, married) stated, "We help each other to try and stay on track. I usually ask her what I should snack on so I don't go eat a giant bowl of ice cream or something." Other participants described general motivation and reinforcement from their partner, such as "He has been vocally motivating me. When I want to give up or give in to something I shouldn't, he encourages me to keep on track in a positive way" (female, 27, married). Another participant stated, "She doesn't pressure me, she motivates me and wants me to do better and encourages me to make better choices whatever my food choices" (male, 39, in a serious dating relationship). These examples illustrate the tangible ways in which romantic partners may motivate one another to stick to their goals by encouraging actions that will lead to success.

Emotional support and positive reinforcement. The third theme referenced emotional support and positive reinforcement from romantic partners (16.9% of thematic units). Individuals often discussed efforts from their partner to bolster self-esteem and make them feel better about their weight loss efforts. When respondents were discouraged or frustrated by their efforts, their partner told them they were doing a good job, complimented their appearance, or noticed when participants made progress. One participant (female, age 32, married) stated, "He is encouraging to me in my efforts. He compliments me on the change in my appearance and in sticking to my exercise goals." Another participant (female, age 24, in a serious dating relationship) described how her partner picks her up when she is feeling discouraged,

He's also been really great when I've felt badly about my weight loss efforts. I called him on Sunday disappointed that I hadn't worked out all weekend and ate poorly. He told me that I was already in great shape and didn't need to worry.

Individuals also indicated that their partner was proud of them. One participant (female, age 34, married) stated, "[My partner] gives a lot of verbal praise and will make a positive comment when he sees me making a healthy food choice." Another participant said, "He told me in a very nice way that he finds me sexier now, because he can touch more of me at once. He supports me emotionally and is always trying to make our communication more fluid" (female, 26, in a serious dating relationship). Thus, romantic partners were often instrumental in promoting a

positive attitude about the weight loss process and encouraging the partner to feel good about what they have been able to accomplish.

Exercise together. The next theme referenced efforts to exercise together with a partner (13.1% of thematic codes). This included joint activities such as going to the gym together, taking a walk together, competition, and goal setting. Participants described exercise as a more enjoyable activity when it was done with a partner, "It's more enjoyable to be active and take walks when we're together than when we're apart. While we don't do it often enough, we're more likely to do it when we're together" (female, age 26, in a serious dating relationship). Another participant (male, age 35, married) shared this sentiment, "I know the best way to lose weight is to exercise more, and we could always do exercises together, that's much better than when I'm alone." Another respondent explained,

She rearranged her schedule to go to the gym with me so we could do it together, and she suggested we attend a new workout class on Tuesday, since I couldn't attend the Thursday class we usually go to due to work. (male, 26, in a serious dating relationship)

Participants also mentioned different activities they did with their partners. One participant (female, age 33, married) stated, "He loves to do physical activity like running, skiing, being outdoors, so we do these things together." Romantic partners often encouraged their partners to be physically active. For example, one participant (female, age 28, in a serious dating relationship) stated, "He often tries to get me to engage in more physical activities with him, such as going for runs with him or doing cardio workouts in our home." Thus, one way that romantic partners facilitate weight loss goals is by participating in exercise together.

Partner enabling exercise. The next theme referenced the partner enabling exercise (10.2% of thematic codes). In contrast to the previous theme, this theme reflected ways that partners made it easier for participants to workout or accomplish fitness goals. This included purchasing fitness equipment, taking care of chores around the house so participants had time to exercise, and finding ways to make exercise easier. One participant (female, age 42, married) described her husband's helpful behavior in the following way:

During the weekend he watches the kids so that I can go on a run without worrying about what is happening at home. He fixed up a bicycle for me and bought me the trainer and gear I need so that I can cycle in the house. I can't leave the home unsupervised to go on bike rides during the week, and this gives me a chance to exercise and train for a 100k ride we're doing together in May.

Romantic partners also took on added responsibilities or inconvenienced themselves to make it easier for the respondent to find time for exercise. For example, one participant (female, 24, in a serious dating relationship) said, "He took over household duties while I went to the gym. He rearranged his school schedule to give me time to go to the gym with a friend." Another participant (female, 24, in a serious dating relationship) explained, "He encouraged me to sign up for a running class and lets me use the car when I have class, even though it makes it inconvenient for him to get to work." Partners also offered tangible support for participants, for example, "He also paid for us to have a 3 year membership at Gold's Gym" (female, age 31, married), and "He helped me unpack and look for my running shoes. I was almost on the verge of a breakdown since all my clothes are in boxes and I cannot find anything" (female, age 38, in a serious dating relationship). Thus, beyond partaking in exercise together as a form of motivation, partners also provided equipment and time to otherwise enable participants to exercise.

Dieting together. The next theme referenced efforts to facilitate weight loss goals by participating in a diet together (9.8% of thematic codes). Participants described efforts to plan meals together and mutual agreement between partners to cook at home instead of eating at restaurants. One participant (female, age 29, married) said, "We also talk about food choices together. We save up [Weight Watchers] points so that we can eat out on dates together." Another participant (female, age 23, married) was appreciative of her partner, stating "The mere fact that my husband is also eating healthier, whole foods and not eating wheat has helped by being a positive influence on me." Partners were also willing to make sacrifices to help participants maintain a healthy diet. One participant (female, age 24, in a serious dating relationship) noted, "My partner is happy to accept food substitutions when we cook together (which is approximately four nights per week)." This sacrifice was also evident in the following examples, "[He's] working on his own bad habits of eating junky type foods, especially late at night or when stressed" (female, age 31, married); "He suggests healthy meals or healthy places for us to eat together instead of unhealthy places" (female, age 23, in a serious dating relationship) and "He and I both decided against getting ice cream one night, citing that it was not a healthy thing for either of us and we didn't need it" (female, 24, in a serious dating relationship). These examples illustrate that one way partners facilitate weight loss goals is by participating in healthier eating together.

Relationship influence and priorities. The final theme referenced relationship influence and priorities as a factor that facilitates weight loss (3.5% of thematic codes). For

example, participants felt accountable to their partners as a reason to lose weight. Individuals also mentioned dependence on their partner and relationship to accomplish goals. One participant (female, age 35, married) described healthy competition with her partner as a reason for weight loss, "When he is motivated to exercise, I exercise just so that he doesn't lose more weight than me. I know that sounds insane, but it is true." Another participant (female, 30, married) stated,

His own fitness goals and workout ethic is also pretty inspiring. It also makes me feel competitive, like I don't want to be the one left behind, that has gotten me to say no to a piece a chocolate a time or two.

Participants also expressed a desire to keep up with their partners. One respondent (female, age 36, married) discussed her husband's success and how that motivated her to continue with her plan: "He told me he went down a pants size. That motivates me to keep going." Another participant (male, age 25, in a serious dating relationship) felt the responsibility to sustain his plan because of his girlfriend: "When I know she is doing stuff like dance classes and jogging and she looks good it motivates me to do the same and also look good." Another participant (male, age 34, in a serious dating relationship) went so far as to say, "I know she will leave me if I can't achieve my weight loss goal." Thus, maintaining the relationship and out-performing one's partner in terms of weight loss proved to help individuals achieve their weight loss goals.

Themes of Partner Interference in Weight Loss Goals

The second research question asked about the ways in which romantic partners interfere with weight loss goals. Results of the theme analysis revealed four themes related to partner interference in weight loss goals: (a) inability to plan for healthy meals (38.3% of cases), (b) inability to control the food environment (15.3%), (c) preventing or discouraging exercise (13.1%), and (d) emotional or relational discouragement (7.2%). In 24.4% of cases, individuals indicated that their partner did nothing to interfere with their weight loss goals.

Inability to plan for healthy meals. The largest theme suggested that romantic partners made it difficult to plan healthy meals (38.3% of thematic codes). This theme was defined as the ways partners made it difficult to stick to a diet plan, such as partners who ate an unhealthy diet themselves, partners who encouraged eating at restaurants instead of at home, partners who encouraged cheating on the diet, partners who disregarded portion sizes, partners who complained about eating healthier, and

partners with a quicker metabolism who could eat whatever they like without consequence. Many participants felt that it was difficult to control their diet when the partner's diet was not also being controlled. One respondent (female, age 36, married) stated, "His diet and portion control are poor. He does not alter his eating when I am trying to eat better. It is difficult to watch him consume food that I am trying not to eat." Another participant (male, age 26, in a serious dating relationship) stated,

My partner has a fast metabolism and does not need to control what she eats as much as I do. This can be challenging because any dietary decisions we make are really driven by my desire/necessity to lose weight, not hers.

Other comments along these lines included, "Sometimes her need to incorporate a cheat meal/cheat day in feels like it can hinder our progress" (male, 39, in a serious dating relationship), and

[My partner] likes to eat chips and salty foods sometimes on the weekends. I used to eat these types of foods with him before I started my diet. Now I have to maintain self-control when he is indulging and I cannot partake. (female, 33, married)

Finally, a number of respondents mentioned social pressures to go out to eat with their partner or with family and friends. One participant (female, age 28, married) stated,

He will want me to join him in social eating/drinking that I would prefer to abstain from at this point. He will often make comments like "you worked so hard the last few days that you deserve a day to splurge."

Similarly, another participant (female, age 27, in a serious dating relationship) complained about the encouragement to splurge, "Lately, 'we're celebrating' has been a common statement to encourage me to eat more food and drink alcohol." Another participant (female, 24, in a serious dating relationship) highlighted the long-distance nature of their relationship as a reason to splurge when they are together, "We are in a long-distance relationship so we don't see each other that often. But when we do, we often go out for dinner and other meals." These examples illustrate that a romantic partner's influence often made it difficult to stick to a diet and plan for healthy meals.

Inability to control the food environment. The second theme suggested that partners made it difficult to control the food environment in the home (15.3% of thematic codes). Sometimes participants noted that it was hard to control their eating because their partner was responsible for most of the cooking, as described by one participant

(female, 28, in a serious relationship) who said, “He cooks most meals, which makes it harder to control calories. He uses too much butter in his cooking, and although the food tastes fantastic, it’s not helping with my weight loss.” Responses frequently mentioned partners who brought unhealthy food into the home that tempted the partner who was trying to lose weight. One participant (female, age 35, married) stated,

I told him not to get me anything when he ran in to get the kids something. He got a large ice cream cone for us to split and I ended up eating it when I had made up my mind that I wasn’t going to have any.

Another participant (female, age 35, engaged) said, “He brought food that I never bring into the house. Cookies, high fat crackers, processed food, pop . . . it’s been a high-temptation couple weeks.” Thus, partners who were not trying to diet often kept foods around that were considered a temptation to the dieting partner. Notably, in many cases the respondents recognized that their partner was not being malicious, but was attempting to show affection or use food as a reward. For example, one participant (female, age 31, married) said, “Occasionally he will bring soda or fattening foods into the house because he wants to ‘reward’ me with my favorite foods.” Another participant (female, 27, in a serious relationship) stated, “I also have a weakness for chocolate, and he knows it. He doesn’t mean to be malicious, but he sometimes surprises me with chocolate and then I can’t help myself.” Similarly, some partners unintentionally encouraged overeating because they wanted to avoid wastefulness, as described by one partner (male, 38, in a domestic partnership) who stated, “She will also try and get me to finish what is left on her plate saying that it will go to waste if I don’t eat it and there is not enough to save.” Thus, most participants acknowledged that their partner had positive intentions that were not always appreciated.

Preventing or discouraging exercise. The third theme suggested that partners hindered weight loss goals by preventing or discouraging exercise (13.1% of thematic codes). This theme described the various ways the partner discouraged or prevented physical fitness, including mentioning different fitness levels, encouraging skipping workouts, refusing to exercise, and avoidance. One participant (female, age 26, in a serious dating relationship) stated,

We’re big basketball fans, so a lot of weekends are spent in front of the TV, rather than going out. Additionally, because we’re both often tired from work, when you’re in a serious relationship, it’s very easy to just want to take it easy and sit around on the couch.

For several participants, romantic partners offered a comfortable, welcoming alternative to a strenuous exercise routine. Spending quality time with a romantic partner was viewed as one reason exercise was avoided, “[he] encourages me to take it easier on myself, snuggles in bed, making it hard to get up and workout” (female, age 26, married). Even when participants were adhering to their workout routine, many felt that their partner was distracting. One participant (female, 33, in a domestic partnership) explained she gets up extremely early to fit in a workout so that she has time to do other tasks around the house but her partner even managed to disrupt her workouts at this time, “Interrupting me during exercise! I workout very early in the morning. He has been getting up 2–3 times during this time all week to just hang out and watch me workout or talk. It’s 3 a.m.!” Many of the respondents identified the hindrance that occurred as being a simple byproduct of the relationship itself, rather than the fault of the partner specifically. Several participants perceived an imbalance in household labor as another factor hindering their weight loss goals. One participant (female, age 42, married) stated,

He went cycling 3 days this weekend, for a total of 14 hours gone. The kids and I barely saw him. During the week he gets to ride about 12 hours. I feel like it’s unbalanced, because I could use more time to exercise too.

Another participant (female, age 35, married) stated, “He gets really annoyed if I ask him to watch the kids so I can make time to exercise.” Thus, partners often made it difficult to find the time or motivation to exercise.

Emotional or relational discouragement. The final theme was emotional or relational discouragement (7.2% of thematic codes). This theme was described as the various ways participants were discouraged by hurtful comments, lack of attention, or threats to the relationship associated with weight loss. Examples included partners neglecting to notice weight loss, unwanted pressure, no acknowledgment of goals, lack of support, guilt tripping, apathy, jealousy, or competition. One respondent (female, age 31, married) stated, “I sometimes feel like he is competing with me, instead of helping me. He loves to point out how much weight he has lost.” Another participant (female, age 39, married) mentioned, “He’s losing weight faster than I am, and it’s very frustrating. Even though I know I could be doing more to lose.” Even non-reciprocated acknowledgment of weight loss achievements were related to emotional discouragement, as described by one respondent (female, age 36, married): “He expected a grand reaction to his weight loss despite having made no mention of my weight loss over the past two years.” A lack of acknowledgment was also a source of relational

discouragement. One participant (female, age 37, married) noted that her husband “honestly doesn’t notice or care about my size. If I didn’t outright tell him that I have lost 53 pounds he would never know.” A number of participants also experienced more direct relational discouragement. For example, one participant (female, 37, married) explained, “[My partner] Got mad at me when I was crying because I was frustrated over losing weight so slow.” Another participant (female, age 29, married) said,

He was mean and unsupportive, which I responded to with not caring about anything related to my weight loss goals. He also told me I was fat, and looked like an 800 pound woman that can’t even leave the house.

A husband’s seemingly innocuous comment about what he finds attractive was also perceived as discouragement to continue losing weight for one participant (female, age 28, married), “My partner has described someone that is at a healthy/average weight as too skinny and stated that he would not like it if I was that small.” Thus, participants felt that their partner’s hurtful comments or relational devaluation was a form of hindrance.

Discussion

This study aimed to identify the ways in which romantic partners facilitate or interfere with individuals’ weight loss goals. Drawing on the logic of the relational turbulence model (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004), we focused on the ways that a partner’s influence can manifest as facilitation or interference in the context of weight loss. Results of a content analysis revealed seven themes of partner facilitation and four themes of partner interference in respondents’ weight loss goals. Theoretically, the results of this study advance the relational turbulence model by focusing on the role of a partner’s influence in promoting or impeding a specific goal. Pragmatically, our results are useful for highlighting the social and relational factors that may explain why some individuals succeed and others fail when it comes to fulfilling their weight loss goals. In the sections that follow, we discuss our results in terms of their implications for promoting weight loss and for advancing the relational turbulence model.

Implications for Promoting Weight Loss

The results of this study pointed to seven themes of partner facilitation: (a) partner enabling diet, (b) motivation and encouragement, (c) emotional support and positive reinforcement, (d) exercising together, (e) partner enabling exercise, (f) dieting together, and (g) relationship influence and priorities. One overarching theme that is reflected in these categories is that individuals have

more success when they jointly perform tasks related to the goal. This result resonates with prior research that shows people are more likely to maintain a healthy diet and exercise more frequently when they are accountable to another person like a friend, trainer, or dietitian (Foreyt, Goodrick, & Gotto, 1981). Close relationship partners, such as good friends, romantic partners, and family members, are more influential in supporting weight loss than more peripheral members of individuals’ social networks (Marcoux, Trenkner, & Rosenstock, 1990). Thus, romantic partners may facilitate weight loss by providing accountability and solidarity to individuals who are attempting to manage their diet and exercise.

Beyond specific behaviors related to diet and exercise, the themes of partner facilitation also reflect aspects of relational behavior and interpersonal communication that support a partner’s weight loss goals. The themes reveal that romantic partners facilitate weight loss through motivation, encouragement, emotional support, and positive reinforcements. The messages that significant others send regarding a partner’s weight loss are influential in shaping successful outcomes. In particular, confirmations of weight loss that contain elements of both acceptance and challenge are perceived as most effective and have the most impact on people’s execution of diet and exercise goals (Dailey, McCracken, & Romo, 2011; Dailey, Romo, & McCracken, 2010; Dailey, Romo, & Thompson, 2011). Thus, communicating support and encouragement can be especially beneficial for promoting a romantic partner’s weight loss goals.

The results of this study also point to several ways in which romantic partners interfere with individuals’ weight loss goals. Four themes of partner interference emerged in this study: (a) inability to plan for healthy meals, (b) inability to control the food environment, (c) preventing or discouraging exercise, and (d) emotional or relational discouragement. Most of these themes reflect sources of partner interference that arise out of the typical challenges associated with coordinating everyday life. Busy schedules make it tough to find time for exercise, a picky eater makes it difficult to plan a shared meal, and cohabitating in the same space diminishes control over the environment. Consistent with the logic of the relational turbulence model (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004), romantic relationships marked by high levels of interdependence give rise to a climate in which routine disruptions to individual goals are a common byproduct of relational life. Most of the themes of partner interference that emerged in this study reflect the sort of mundane barriers to diet and exercise that one might expect from a relational partner.

The final theme of partner interference, however, suggests that romantic partners may engage in behaviors or communication that more intentionally thwart weight

loss goals. A number of individuals in this study indicated that their romantic partner interfered in their weight loss goals by making comments that were hurtful, unsupportive, or discouraging. Not only will such comments undermine efforts to achieve weight loss but they can also have negative implications for the well-being of the individual and the relationship. Disconfirming comments from a romantic partner can be especially damaging to individuals with low self-esteem and poor body image (Dailey, 2010; Dailey, McCracken, & Romo, 2011). In addition, having an unsupportive or critical romantic partner can diminish relationship satisfaction and intimacy (Davis & Oathout, 1987). Thus, romantic partners should consider how their direct and indirect comments about a partner's weight loss might have implications for personal and relational well-being.

Notably, a large number of responses for both facilitation and interference indicated that the romantic partner had no influence on individual weight loss goals. On one hand, this finding may suggest that individuals are so motivated to achieve their weight loss goals that they do not allow a romantic partner to stymie their efforts. On the other hand, this finding could reflect the fact that a partner's influence is such a routine part of interdependent relationships that individuals lack awareness of their partner's positive or negative involvement in their personal goals. Additional research is required to better understand the reasons behind this result. In addition, the theme analysis in this study revealed nearly twice as many themes of facilitation as it did themes of interference. This finding suggests that, at least in the case of weight loss, individuals may tend to make positive attributions for their partner's actions and behaviors in the relationship, rather than assuming a partner has malicious intent. Studies suggest that individuals in satisfying romantic relationships tend to make more positive attributions for their partner's behavior than individuals in dissatisfying relationships (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). Thus, to the extent that our sample was comprised of individuals who are generally satisfied with their relationship, the themes in this study may be reflecting positive attribution biases.

One important consideration when interpreting these results is related to our recruitment strategy for this study. We recruited individuals who were actively trying to lose weight from online communities dedicated to weight loss. We used this recruitment strategy so that participants in the study would be mindful of their own weight loss goals and the specific activities they were engaged in to achieve those goals, because we thought a romantic partner's facilitation or interference would be more salient to individuals who were enacting specific behaviors to achieve their goals. The participants in our study were able to identify very specific ways in which their own weight loss activities were shaped by the influence

of a romantic partner or indicated that there was nothing that their partner could do to derail their commitment to their weight loss efforts. In contrast, individuals who desire weight loss but who have not taken any specific actions to achieve that goal (like joining a weight loss community) may not be able to recognize the ways in which a partner supports or undermines their goals because they are not engaged in any specific weight loss behaviors that could be influenced by a romantic partner. On the other hand, it is possible that individuals with more vague ambitions toward weight loss may perceive even greater partner interference if they are prevented from even enacting a plan for weight loss under their current relationship conditions. Future research on this topic may want to compare the experiences of individuals who are actively engaged in weight loss with those who are casually engaged in weight loss to see if their perceptions of partner facilitation and partner interference vary.

Extending the Relational Turbulence Model

This study employed the logic of the relational turbulence model to focus on facets of romantic partner influence that either help or hinder individuals' weight loss goals. Although this study does not represent a full test of the relational turbulence model, the results extend the model in at least three significant ways. First, this study gives added focus to the mechanism of interference from partners in the relational turbulence model. Although the model gives equal weight to both relational uncertainty and interference from partners as predictors of relational turbulence, many tests of the model have focused exclusively on relational uncertainty as a predictor (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002, 2005; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011; Theiss, 2011) or have found inconsistent results supporting interference from partners as a predictor of turbulence (e.g., Theiss, Knobloch, Checton, & Magsamen-Conrad, 2009). This study sought to rectify this trend by focusing exclusively on facilitation and interference as two possible outcomes of a partner's influence in romantic relationships.

The second way that this study extends the relational turbulence model is by focusing on the ways that a romantic partner can facilitate or interfere with a specific goal. A partner's facilitation and interference have typically been operationalized in the relational turbulence model to focus on global perceptions of a partner's involvement in everyday life (e.g., Knobloch & Solomon, 2004; Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Although a partner's influence is likely to be present in nearly every aspect of one's daily routines, individuals are likely to be more acutely aware of the ways their partner promotes or impedes their actions when they are pursuing a specific goal. This study identified the context of weight loss as a

goal where a partner's facilitation and interference might be more keenly felt. Future studies should consider additional contexts where individuals' goals are likely to be especially salient, such as efforts to get pregnant, finish school, or reduce debt. In addition, future work on the relational turbulence model may want to consider goal importance as a factor that might influence the extent to which individuals perceive a partner's influence. Individuals who place a large degree of importance on goal achievement may be more sensitive to their partner's influence than individuals who are ambivalent about their goal. These issues warrant further attention.

The third contribution of this study to the relational turbulence model is that it shifted the focus away from the effects that partner facilitation and partner interference have on people's emotions, cognitions, and behaviors to more explicitly consider the actions and behaviors of one's partner that are perceived as influential. This study is one of a few recent investigations that have considered sources of a partner's interference in various contexts. Knobloch and Theiss (2012) considered sources of partner interference among military couples during reintegration following deployment. Nagy and Theiss (2013) examined sources of partner interference among married couples who were navigating the transition to the empty-nest phase of marriage. Adding to these studies, the current investigation explores the actions and behaviors that are perceived as helpful or harmful in the pursuit of the specific goal of weight loss. Studies like these are helpful for establishing a clearer picture of the relational climate that gives rise to interference from partners as a mechanism of relational turbulence.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

Our study has several strengths. First, the use of longitudinal data allowed us to examine multiple sources of a partner's facilitation and interference in individuals' weight loss goals over time. Second, the longitudinal data resulted in a relatively large number of thematic units for a content analysis, which is unusual for qualitative analyses of this nature. Third, by allowing participants to describe their partner's facilitation and interference in their own words we were able to obtain a more nuanced picture of the variety of ways that romantic partners influence health goals.

This study also had some limitations. First, the individual nature of the data limits our ability to evaluate the perspectives of both partners in the couple. Although individuals may have positive or negative perceptions of their partner's influence on their weight loss, we are unable to examine the intentions of the partner. We are also unable to assess the ways that an individual's weight loss goals may potentially be perceived as interference by

the partner. Future studies should obtain dyadic data and employ actor-partner interdependence analyses to assess the mutual influence that partners have on one another's goals and routines. Our recruitment procedures also present a possible limitation. We recruited individuals from online weight loss communities who were actively trying to lose weight. This strategy may have resulted in a sample of individuals who were particularly motivated to seek support for their weight loss goals and less likely to allow a partner to interfere with their efforts. A sample of individuals who adopted a more casual approach to weight loss may have produced different results. Future research may want to sample from communities with more diverse motives for weight loss.

Conclusion

With obesity on the rise and the myriad health problems that can accompany weight gain, it is important to help people identify strategies to maintain a healthy weight. Although diet and exercise advice are abundant, a less frequently mentioned factor that can influence weight gain or weight loss is the influence of a romantic partner. The results of this theme analysis suggest that there are a number of ways that a romantic partner can facilitate or interfere with an individual's weight loss goals, which can have implications for people's health and the quality of their relationships. To the extent that relationship partners facilitate weight loss, overweight individuals are likely to be healthier and may have more positive feelings toward their partner. On the other hand, having a partner who impedes weight loss can make overweight individuals less healthy and more resentful of their partner. Thus, understanding the interdependence that exists between romantic partners and weight loss goals is important for promoting healthier lifestyles and happier relationships.

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