FACILITATING BEHAVIOUR CHANGE TO TACKLE OBESITY

It is difficult for people to make lifestyle changes on their own; indeed they require encouragement and continued support in order to successfully change old habits and behaviours. Slimming World now holds over 8,000 weekly support groups across the UK, each year influencing over 3 million people to eat more healthily and adopt a more active lifestyle. We use our group support structure to facilitate changes in behaviour to both diet and activity levels with the aim of enabling members to take control of their own health and lifestyle for the long-term. In the weekly group, members share experiences and ideas, for instance on how to spot common pitfalls and create strategies to avoid them. They also receive practical, accessible help that makes small changes easy, such as healthy new recipes and menu plans for the family, tips on special offers at local supermarkets to make healthy eating affordable.

We believe it is crucial that adequate focus and resource is given to empower, motivate and support people in making healthy lifestyle change, particularly when linked with obesity and the low self-esteem, poor health and lack of confidence in the ability to make changes often associated with it. In our experience, many overweight people want to make changes, lose weight, become fitter or more active, but they lack confidence and belief that they can make effective changes to their diet and lifestyle. This is particularly the case when related to weight loss as many fear they will have to go hungry when making dietary changes and may have to follow a very restricted diet. They may have tried and failed at many previous attempts to lose weight, reducing even further their belief that they will ever be able to do it. They may also not be clear of the benefits of change, particularly in relation to increasing activity levels, lack confidence in how to get started, and have misconceptions about what effective activity is. Enormous help and support is needed to lift individuals out of a spiral of overweight, poor health and low self-esteem. This support must be positive and motivational and, most importantly, self-determined. It is only effective when it is delivered with empathy and encouragement, without judgement, criticism or a desire to control.

In order to effectively support people in changing behaviours to manage their weight, Slimming World offer a multi-component approach:

- A warm, empowering, non-judgmental group environment with a proven self-discovery and behaviour change component which supports members and facilitates behaviour change towards a healthier lifestyle
- A satisfying eating plan based on easily available everyday foods to promote healthy eating patterns for life
- An activity management programme to help members gradually increase physical activity levels

Our group support system is a complex process of individual support in a powerfully motivating group setting made simple for group members. It avoids any criticism, control or judgment and uses elements of techniques including Transactional Analysis, Motivational Interviewing, influence of Ego States on behaviour and more recently Compassionate Mind Theory to help individuals overcome their own personal barriers to change and to avoid relapse.

We believe that the most effective way to deliver behaviour change interventions to tackle obesity is with a whole society approach, one that encourages lifestyle changes for everyone and offers support at every level. Slimming World has the established infrastructure to deliver a large scale effective service. Our weekly groups are held in easily accessible venues such as church halls, community centres and social clubs and are offered across a range of days and at different times of day, with the majority being held outside normal working hours. Therefore, we are well placed to reach a very diverse range of people, including those people traditionally considered hard to reach within public health and in most need of support, often those at the middle to lower end of the socio-economic range. Within a relatively short space of time, many members experience an increase in self-esteem, and as they feel more valued they become less isolated and more active participants in their community.
The most effective agents to deliver this service are local people, working in the heart of their community, who have been through the experience of being overweight and have themselves made healthy lifestyle changes in order to lose weight. Our groups are run by a network of 3,500 Slimming World trained consultants all recruited from successful groups and carefully selected to ensure they have the necessary skills to empathise, empower and support people in managing their weight. They receive specific training in facilitating behaviour change and are continually supported with an ongoing system of training and strong management structure to ensure the quality and consistency of Slimming World groups is maintained.

Influence of Slimming World's programme on diet, activity and health of members and their families

A survey of almost 3000 people accessing the Slimming World programme highlights how we help members make significant changes towards healthier food choices in line with current healthy eating guidelines:

- almost 80% report now buying more fruit and vegetables
- 74% eat less fatty foods
- over 60% now eat less sugary foods
- 58% eat less ready meals and takeaways
- 55% buy more low fat dairy products

Participants also influence others to improve their diet:

- 41% said that their partners also followed the healthy eating principles
- 63% of those with a family reported that the whole family now ate more healthily
- over 80% felt that following the healthy eating programme had improved their health
- 37% also felt that it had helped improve their partner’s health
- 30% believed it had improved their children’s health

Members reported that the Slimming World programme had helped improve conditions such as raised blood pressure, breathlessness, joint pain, asthma, high cholesterol, irritable bowel syndrome and heartburn.

They also reported becoming more active. Plus, 50% of those reporting an increase in activity said that their partner or whole family had also become more active.

(This survey has been published in the Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics, 2009)

Slimming World successfully guides members to self-select a healthier, weight-reducing diet

Diets of low energy density (fewer calories per gram of food) have been shown to be beneficial in lowering energy intake, enhancing satiety and achieving weight loss. The aim of Slimming World’s support programme is to guide members in selecting a healthier, reduced energy density diet rather than using prescriptive weight loss plans. They are encouraged to choose highly satisfying, low energy dense foods which they can eat ad libitum, so
avoiding hunger and the feeling of deprivation commonly associated with weight loss. This encourages members to develop healthier eating habits which can be maintained for life.

A study conducted as part of an European-wide project, Diogenes (EU sixth Framework Diogenes project FP6-513946), confirms that Slimming World members eat more food but less energy than those following either prescribed fat reduction strategies or strategies increasing fruit and vegetable intake per se. This enables them to lose weight by eating more food to satiety and less daily calories, which promotes healthy eating habits and maintenance of weight loss. Importantly, these healthier dietary habits were observed in members who had been attending Slimming World groups for 6 months or longer, indicating sustained behaviour change.

(Study presented at the International Congress on Obesity 2010, abstract available in Obesity Reviews 11: 236)

**Behaviour changes that help Slimming World members maintain their weight loss long-term**

We have also conducted a survey examining behaviour changes associated with weight loss maintenance in members who have achieved and are maintaining their personally chosen target weight. On average, these members had lost 16kg over 10 months to reach their target weight which had been sustained over 11 months at the time of survey. They had reduced their BMI by 6.1kg/m² on average.

Members reported significant changes in behaviour since joining Slimming World including:

- eating less unhealthy snacks
- eating less pre-prepared foods
- eating more fruit and vegetables
- now cooking from scratch
- spending less time watching TV
- spending less time being sedentary
- walking more

The main factors that members felt had helped them reach their target weight were:

- being able to eat low energy dense foods *ad libitum* so they were able to satisfy their appetite
- being able to follow a flexible diet
- peer-group support
- having tools to help them cope with small lapses in their weight loss journey

The main factors that members felt were helping them maintain their weight loss were:

- continued group attendance
- regular monitoring of weight
- changes in long-term dietary and activity habits

(Study presented at the International Congress on Obesity 2010, abstract available in Obesity Reviews 11: 292)

**Slimming World helps adolescents make healthy behaviour changes**

In 2006, Slimming World launched a scheme to support families to adopt a healthier lifestyle and help tackle rising adolescent obesity. With the support of their health professional, young people aged 11 to 15 can attend Slimming World meetings free of charge when they are accompanied by a parent or guardian who is responsible for most of their meals. The focus of our support for adolescents is on behaviour and lifestyle change rather than weight loss. The emphasis is on making small, healthy changes to eating behaviour and becoming more active. Progress towards a healthier Body Mass Index (BMI) for age is monitored every 3 months. Every year around 10,000 adolescents join Slimming World groups to benefit from direct support with healthy eating and learn valuable life skills in how to shop for, cook and enjoy healthier food and increase their activity.

A recent survey confirms the positive impact this has on young members’ lifestyle choices. At the time of the survey, the 96 adolescents who participated had been members for an average of 23 weeks. They had a mean weight loss of 5.0kg, BMI change of -2.5kg/m² and BMI z-score change of -0.5 since joining. Height had increased by 0.01m during this time. Since joining Slimming World our young members had made a number of positive, significant changes to their eating and activity habits.
Changes in eating behaviours

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Rating on a 5-point Likert scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eat a lot of unhealthy snack food at school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eat a lot of unhealthy snack food at home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I eat a lot of takeaway fast food</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I eat less healthy in my leisure time (i.e. holidays and weekends)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I eat less healthy in the food (e.g. pizza and chips)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I drink a lot of sugary drinks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t eat a lot but I eat more the foods that I like</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I just eat whatever &amp; I am given</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I eat regular meals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I eat the recommended 5 portions of fruit &amp; veg a day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Positive values indicate an increase in the behaviour since joining the programme, and negative a decrease.

This survey highlights how younger members are making a number of healthy changes to their diet and activity patterns. These behaviour changes are associated with significant reductions in weight and BMI z-score, whilst importantly not compromising growth in height.

(Study presented at the International Congress on Obesity 2010, abstract available in Obesity Reviews 1: 433)

Healthy lifestyle changes following childbirth

Many women find it difficult to lose excess weight gained during pregnancy. As they have more children weight can increase progressively which increases risk of complications in future pregnancies. Therefore, the postnatal period is a key time to support women in managing their weight. Almost 600 Slimming World members who were attending Slimming World postnatally participated in a survey. 86% said that having a baby had influenced their decision to join.

Since joining Slimming World the mums reported:
• now eating more regularly
• cooking more meals from fresh ingredients
• eating more fruit and vegetables
• eating fewer unhealthy snacks

The majority (76%) also reported now being more active, stating that they were going for more walks and watching TV less.

They also felt that their self-esteem, self-confidence and general well-being had improved since joining group.

43% of respondents said they had reached their pre-pregnancy weight since attending Slimming World and 42% said they were now lighter than before becoming pregnant. Interestingly, of those who had had previous pregnancies after which they had not joined Slimming World, 72% said they had been unable to lose previous pregnancy weight.

When accessing Slimming World postnatally, women also seemed more inclined to breast-feed, with 74% commencing breast-feeding and 57% still breast-feeding at 6 weeks or more. The data suggests that the support provided in Slimming World groups helps postnatal women to adopt healthy lifestyle habits, lose weight and also to feel better about themselves.

(Data presented at the British Dietetic Association conference 2010; abstract available in the Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics 23(4):439-40)

The behaviour changes that Slimming World members make lead to beneficial weight loss
• A study of 5000 Slimming World members showed that on average members who lose 10% of their body weight (current clinical target) do so within 13 weeks, irrespective of their starting weight. 6 months later, over 90% of those still attending Slimming World maintain their weight loss or go on to lose more.

• When they join Slimming World, almost two thirds (62%) of our members are classified as obese (BMI>30), with the average joining BMI of our members being 32.7kg/m² and regularly having a BMI over 65kg/m².

• Our data indicates that of those members who join Slimming World with BMI>30, around 35% lose sufficient weight to no longer be classified as obese within 6 months and over 40% are no longer obese by 12 months, having lost as much as 6-8stone over this time.

Slimming World on Referral
In 2000, Slimming World pioneered a subsidised referral programme that allows health practitioners to offer patients free membership to one of our weekly groups for regular support with their weight management. The Slimming World on Referral programme is now in place in over 60 NHS Trusts.

The programme is based on a feasibility trial conducted in collaboration with Derby Primary Care Trusts in which 2 inner city GP surgeries referred obese patients to a local Slimming World group of their choice. The patients were able to attend their chosen group free of charge for 12 weeks. 85% of the patients referred by their GP enrolled with a Slimming World group. Of these, over two thirds (68%) completed at least 10 of the 12 weekly sessions and achieved a mean weight loss of 5.4kg (6.4% loss in body weight). Over half (52%) of members initially enrolled went on to take responsibility for their own continuing progress, choosing to self-fund further attendance at the group. The mean weight loss in those completing 24 weeks was 11.1kg (11.3% baseline weight). Significant improvements in mental well-being (including feeling calm and peaceful, having more energy and feeling less down-hearted and low) were reported after 12 weeks and continued at 24 weeks.

The referral scheme has been continually evaluated since the nationwide rollout. A recent audit of the first 34,000 patients to be referred to Slimming World shows it continues to achieve clinical weight loss targets in a significant percentage of patients:
• on average referred members attend 9 out of the 12 weeks
• they achieve a mean weight loss of 4.0kg (4.0% decrease in body weight)
more than half (58.1%) attend at least 10 out of the 12 weeks
these members achieve a mean weight loss of 5.5kg (5.5% loss of body weight)
and a decrease in BMI of -2.0kg/m² within 12 weeks
55% of those attending at least 10 weeks lose at least 5% body weight (the clinical target over 3 mths)

These results remain consistent across BMI ranges, therefore highlighting how our referral programme is equally effective for people with a BMI>40kg/m² who, according to national guidance, would often only be considered as suitable for surgery as a solution to their weight control.

(The Slimming World on Referral feasibility study was published in the journal of Public Health, 120, 872-881, 2006)
(The latest results of the audit of 34,000 referred patients was published in Obesity Facts in April 2011)

Excellent support for men too
When they make the decision to join, we find that men generally achieve excellent weight losses in Slimming World groups. They tend to lose weight faster than women, partly influenced by their higher proportion of lean tissue which gives them a higher metabolic rate. We also find that men are generally more focused when they start on a healthy eating plan, with less social pressures women feel, and fewer negative feelings about previous attempts to lose weight. Men tell us they appreciate the fact that, due to the generosity and flexibility of Slimming World’s healthy eating plan, they don’t have to give up the foods they love most, whether that be beer, chips or curry for example.

A survey of Slimming World men-only groups showed that of the men who had been attending for 12 weeks, 91% had reduced their weight by at least 5%, 34% of which had lost 10% or more. Of those who had been members for 24 weeks, all had lost 5% of their body weight and the majority (69%) had lost 10% or more (the clinical target being 5-10% weight loss in 3-6 months).

Data from our NHS referral service also indicates that the Slimming World programme is effective for men. When referred by their health professional, men are just as likely to attend groups as women, with an average attendance of 9.4 out of 12 weeks (compared with 9.2 weeks for women). They also lose a greater amount of weight achieving an average 5.8kg (4.9%) over the 12 weeks compared with 4.0kg (3.9%) weight loss in women over the same time period.

(Data from our men only groups published in the Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics 18(5):391-4, 2005)

IN SUMMARY
The Slimming World programme consists of a multi-component approach in which a highly developed support system is used to facilitate changes in behaviour to diet and activity levels with the aim of enabling members to take responsibility for and control of their own health and lifestyle for the long-term. Our data suggests that members make significant, positive changes to their diet and activity patterns in line with current recommendations. These behaviour changes are leading to successful weight loss and maintenance of weight loss. We believe we can play an important role in supporting health services to meet the public health challenges posed by obesity and ultimately reducing NHS costs. We would be happy to provide further information on our approach and details of our research studies.

Dr Jacquie Lavin, Head of Nutrition and Research, Slimming World, Clover Nook Road, Somercotes, Alfreton, Derbyshire DE55 4RF. 01773 546075, jacquie.lavin@slimming-world.com