

# THE WEIGHT OF THE MIND: The link between obesity and mental disorders



At present, obesity is a highly prevalent disease worldwide and affects more than 670 million people. The fact that the disease promotes metabolic disorders and serious cardio-metabolic complications (diabetes mellitus, arterial hypertension, and dyslipidaemia) has already been extensively researched.

Being obese significantly increases the chances of also developing mental disorders. This applies to all age groups, with women at higher risk than men for most diseases. Obesity tends to precede the manifestation of psychiatric diagnoses such as depression, nicotine addiction, and anxiety, among others. Thorough screening for mental health problems in obese patients is indicated to facilitate prevention or ensure that appropriate treatment can be given.

## Key facts:

1. Obesity is significantly linked to an increased risk of various mental disorders.
2. In most cases, the diagnosis of obesity tends to precede the manifestation of psychiatric disorders.
3. Women with obesity have a higher risk of developing most mental disorders. Almost 70% of South African women are either overweight or obese and this is the highest rates of obesity in women in Africa. Among South African men, 31% are overweight or obese.



## What you can do...

- Dealing with obesity and similar weight-control problems requires adopting new habits that foster a healthier lifestyle, but don't attempt radical changes to your diet or activity patterns. You risk not only compounding what is already a precarious health situation, but also overlooking the core attitude and emotional issues that caused obesity in the first place.
- Instead, consider a team approach that involves several qualified health professionals. Your doctor will help you develop a safe plan for losing weight that includes both diet and exercise.
- A mental health professional can help you with the emotional side of the equation, the stress, depression or experiences that caused you to gain weight.

## Here are some suggestions to consider in helping you, or someone you know, take action against obesity:

- **Think about what you eat and why.**

Track your eating habits by writing down everything you eat, including time of day and amount of food. Also record what was going through your mind at the time. Were you sad or upset with something? Or, had you just finished a stressful experience and felt the need for "comfort food?"

- **Note that while treating obesity often helps decrease feelings of depression, weight loss is never successful if you remain burdened by stress and other negative feelings.** You may have to work to resolve these issues first before beginning a weight-loss programme.

- **Use the "buddy system."** Ask a friend or family member to be "on-call" for moral support when you're tempted to stray from your new lifestyle. Just be sure you're not competing with this person to lose weight.

- **Cut down on portions while eating the same foods.**

Along with making dieting feel less depriving, you'll soon find that the smaller portions are just as satisfying. This will also give you a platform to safely curb your appetite even more.

- **Losing weight is always easier when you have the support of friends and family.** Try to enlist the entire household in eating a healthier diet.

- **Don't obsess over "bad days" when you can't help eating more.** This is often a problem for women who tend to be overly hard on themselves for losing discipline. Look at what thoughts or feelings caused you to eat more on a particular day, and how you can deal with them in ways other than binge eating. A mental health professional can help you formulate an action plan for managing these uncomfortable feelings.



Where lifestyle changes have been made and progress is positive, consult one of the Platinum Health Medical Scheme (PHMS) Medical Centres for advice on medicinal treatment that could be prescribed to assist you on your weight loss journey. Our 2024 benefit schedule includes assistance for members in this regard.

**If you feel you're struggling psychologically to beat obesity, consider reaching out to Platinum Health's Mental Health Services on 014 590 1700 or 080 000 6942. EAP Counsellors (010 133 0525) are also available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week to offer counselling and support.**

### Source:

[www.apa.org/topics/obesity/mind-body-health](http://www.apa.org/topics/obesity/mind-body-health); Complexity Science Hub Vienna