

Nutrition

Improving nutritional choices is a key way the NEW DOOR program helps people with disabilities reframe their perspectives on how to deal with weight-management and obesity problems. We have created a full nutrition education program for this purpose.

Here's how one disabled woman clearly stated why she needs information, resources, and programs that are customized for people with disabilities:

When it comes to weight loss, nothing fits (and I am not talking about old clothes) because I am also a person with a disability. I have spastic cerebral palsy and use a power wheelchair. . . I'm told there are a lot of us, and why shouldn't there be? Activity comes hard to people with mobility impairments, and eating may be one of the few physical pleasures we know. . I can't go on Biggest Loser or something similar because I can't do the exercises they do. Sometimes the activities I can do aggravate other medical issues. Weightwatchers is problematic because its scales are inaccessible, its point system assumes that a 10-minute walk takes almost no energy. . . I can't move my legs, so my attempt to be healthy is apparently doomed to failure. Unless. . . Unless I redefine success. What if success wasn't just about the numbers? What if it was about choices, about a process I choose to engage in; not an outcome I can't control? If my goal is not weight loss, but making healthy choices, I can do that! I can choose to eat fruit instead of candy; to drink water instead of Coke. Healthy living is a process which includes, but is not limited to weight management. Maybe knowing that can change this from a discouraging journey to one I can celebrate!

The NEW DOOR Nutrition and Body Image Curriculum

Our nutrition education curriculum responds to this problem by “redefining success.” The curriculum explores many other nutritional programs but is tailored to the specific needs of people with disabilities.

An important consultant on nutritional issues has been the University of California's Center for Weight and Health, located within short walking distance of our own offices at the Ed Roberts Campus. They have offered consultation from their faculty and have provided graduate student interns to help us develop and present our curriculum and events.

The curriculum is designed for usage in nutrition education classes and events that meet every week or twice per month. These events and classes have included hands-on activities like:

- going grocery shopping at local supermarkets and farmers markets,
- cooking simple, tasty meals,
- taste-testing healthy snacks, and
- learning about alternatives to unhealthy foods.

These activities are meant not just for people with disabilities but also for their family members and allies, including personal assistance providers. These additional participants are important because they often help prepare the food that disabled people eat.

In our events and discussions we have also looked at topics such as:

- recommended nutritional guidelines,
- the barriers that people with various disabilities may have in accessing healthy foods in supermarkets or farmers markets,
- strategies for dealing with difficulty in reading labels on food packages,
- getting help shopping,
- figuring out how to balance the need to eat healthy foods with the convenience of pre-packaged foods,
- making time and finding accommodations for home food preparation, and
- other issues like the significance of family food histories, food cravings, and factors raised by program participants.

Body Image

In addition to discussing exercise, food, and healthy choices, the NEW DOOR curriculum includes body image. We have engaged our participants in our events, discussions, and peer interactions, listening to what they think are the essential issues related to body image.

Our culture's focus on youth and beauty pressures us to diet, use weight-loss medications, or employ other quick-fix approaches to body issues by making us feel badly about our bodies. People with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to these confusing and distorting messages, which invalidate bodies that don't conform to impossible standards of appearance. As such, our program explores body image as it related to disability, including concepts such as "fat oppression," media images of bodies, the almost complete absence of people with disabilities in the mainstream media and Hollywood, "yo-yo dieting," anorexia, bulimia, and how depression may interact with food and nutrition.