Study Examines Use of Financial Incentives in Online Group-based Behavioral Weight Control

Delia West, professor of exercise science and SmartState Endowed Chair for the Technology Center to Promote Healthy Lifestyles (TecHealth) at the University of South Carolina’s Arnold School of Public Health, has collaborated with faculty/students from TecHealth as well as colleagues at the University of Tennessee, Duke University, and the University of Vermont to examine the use of financial incentives in online group-based behavioral weight control. They published their findings in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

“Internet-delivered behavioral weight control is promising for expanding the reach and availability of weight management, but online programs produce lower weight losses than typically achieved in person,” Dr. West says. “Financial incentives have been shown to increase weight losses in programs offered in person, so the next logical step was to test them in an online program.”

With this randomized control trial, the researchers examined whether adding financial incentives for self-monitoring and achieving target weight losses increases weight losses attained in a fully online, group-based behavioral weight management program compared with the same program without financial incentives. The team recruited more than 400 participants from South Carolina and Vermont who were randomly assigned to two groups who participated in 24 online sessions with weekly synchronous Internet chat sessions. One of the groups received weekly financial incentives for self-monitoring body weight and dietary intake as well as for achieving target weight losses at two and six months. The other group did not.

Dr. West and her team found that participants in the group that received financial incentives lost more weight than those in the other group. In addition, a higher proportion of the incentives group achieved ≥5% weight loss. Treatment engagement, self-monitoring of behaviors targeted by incentives, higher rates of self-management behaviors not targeted by the incentives, self-reported activity, and study retention were also greater for this group.

“Adding financial incentives to a program delivered fully online increases weight losses compared with the program alone,” says Dr. West. “Using incentives can achieve weight losses comparable to in-person programs, offering potential for clinically meaningful weight loss across substantial geographic reach.”