

SCIENCE OF US

4 Issues Scientists Have With *The Biggest Loser*

By Melissa Dahl | January 4, 2016



Photo: Tyler Golden/NBC

The Biggest Loser is back tonight with a new season — its 17th — despite losing 30 percent of its viewers last season, according to *The Guardian*. Like a lot of reality TV, the show's setup sometimes seems an awful lot like some kind of weird science experiment that happens to be televised — which is no doubt one of the reasons why many actual scientists have decided to study it since the show's premiere in 2004.

What they've found, mostly, is evidence that the show promotes pretty negative attitudes about overweight people, while at the same time sending confusing messages to viewers at home about the best ways to lose weight. Here's a brief look at some of those studies.

It's teaching viewers the wrong way to lose weight. According to the general consensus in the scientific literature, exercise alone is not the best approach to weight loss. Physical activity is okay if you're interested in maintaining your current weight, but on its own it doesn't really prevent weight gain; this is no doubt at least in part because exercising makes you really, really hungry. Apologies in advance, because this next part is no fun at all: Eating less — and eating more nutritious foods — appears to be the more promising path to lost pounds.



But *The Biggest Loser* gets this backward, according to a study published last spring in the *Journal of Health Communications*. After reviewing 66 episodes from seasons 10 through 13, researchers from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee calculated that of the time the show devoted to discussing weight-management strategies, 85 percent was spent on exercise and just 13.5 percent on the benefits of a healthy diet.

It's also teaching viewers to hate exercise. Exercise may not be a magic bullet for weight loss, but that's not to say that exercise is worthless. Beyond the questions of pounds shed, exercise is good for plenty of things that add up to an overall healthier and happier life, such as increased life expectancy and better mental health. But even as *The Biggest Losers* spends a disproportionate amount of time singing the praises of physical activity, it is actively discouraging its viewers from exercising themselves.

A University of Alberta study from 2012 found that people who watched *The Biggest Loser* had worse attitudes toward exercise than those who watched some other reality show, like *American Idol*. "The depictions of exercise on shows like *The Biggest Loser* are really negative," Tanya Berry, the study's lead author, said in a press release. "People are screaming and crying and throwing up, and if you're not a regular exerciser you might think this is what exercise is -- that it's this horrible experience where you have to push yourself to the extremes and the limits, which is completely wrong."

It leads to pretty terrible attitudes about fat people. In one experiment, people who watched just one episode of *The Biggest Loser* exhibited more negative attitudes toward fat people than those who hadn't watched the show, according to a 2012 study in the journal *Obesity*. After watching the show, people were more likely to agree with statements like "Although some overweight people must be intelligent, generally I think they tend not to be" or "I feel disgusted with myself when I gain weight."

In 2013, another study came up with similar findings, and those authors concluded that shows like *The Biggest Loser* may be fueling the obesity stigma, which can cause problems for the overweight in the workplace, at school, and at the doctor's office, research has shown. Weight stigma can also, ironically, lead to weight gain.

And then there's the harm to the contestants themselves. A stint on the show is enough to cause long-term harm to a person's metabolism, according to a 2012 paper co-authored by Dr. H. himself — that is, **Dr. Robert Huizenga**, who has appeared on the show. That study tracked contestants after they left the show, and found that their metabolism was slower than what you'd expect in people who'd just lost a lot of weight. The researchers suggested that unless the former *Losers* stick to the extreme exercise and caloric restriction they were introduced to on the show, they would probably regain the weight.

This, *The Guardian* points out, may be why you rarely see cast reunions for this show: As season-two contestant Suzanne Mendonca has phrased it, "We're all fat again."

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