

Fat – it’s all in the mind, say psychologists

By **Rod Mills**
Chief Reporter

OBESE people could be tricked into losing weight by planting false memories, scientists have revealed.

Psychologists at St Andrews University found that how people form memories of food can have significant long-term effects on behaviour.

The findings suggest obese patients could be “programmed” to believe they felt ill after eating unhealthy foods as children, causing them to avoid those foods as adults.

Yesterday the research was hailed as a possible breakthrough in dealing with the spiralling epidemic of overeating, which costs the NHS billions each year.

Change

In a series of studies psychologist Dr Elke Geraerts found that it is possible to change long-term behaviours by inducing false memories using a simple suggestive technique.

Dr Geraerts, a lecturer at St Andrews and associate of Maastricht University, where the study was carried out, said: “It may be possible for people to learn to avoid certain foods by believing they had negative experiences with them as a child.”

Researchers investigated the theory that many people avoid foods like brussel sprouts, or suffer adult phobia which are

based on stories told to them by

parents.

In a series of experiments, the researchers falsely suggested that participants had become ill after eating egg salad as a child.

Of the 117 research subjects told they had become ill as children after eating egg salad, 41 later believed it to be true.

And even four months after the study they were found to

avoid egg salad. Scientists believe the research, published in Psychological Science journal, could even be used to stop people smoking and as a weapon in the fight against drug addiction.

Dr Geraerts said the technique could also be developed to persuade people to eat healthy foods which they may have disliked as children, like broccoli, and turn round negative attitudes to health foods.

Obesity among Scots adults has increased by 46 per cent since 1995.

Dr Colin Waine, chairman of the National Obesity Forum, said public money should be made available to test how useful the technique could be in reducing the UK’s obesity problem.

Dr Waine said: “Potentially it could have a part to play.”



THINK THIN:
Dr Elke Geraerts says memory inducement could be the answer to solving the big problem of obesity





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MINICOSM

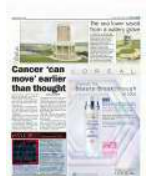
 SCIENCE & DISCOVERY IN BRIEF

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Experts able to plant false memories in minds

BRIAN DONNELLY

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NEW research into the human memory has found that it is possible to plant false memories in the mind that can have significant long-term effects on behaviour.

The work by psychologists at St Andrews University shows that the human memory can be remarkably fragile and even inventive when it comes to remembering past events, often completely rewriting "autobiographical belief".

In a series of studies Dr Elke Geraerts found that it is possible to change long-term behaviours by inducing false memories using a simple suggestive technique.

The findings of the food-based study may be used positively to treat conditions such as obesity or aid dieting by using "suggestive therapy".

Dr Geraerts, a lecturer at St Andrews and associate of Maastricht University, where the study was carried out, said: "The false suggestion of a childhood event can lead to persistent false beliefs that have lasting behavioural consequences. Studies on false memories and beliefs have compellingly shown that misleading information can lead to the creation of recollections of entire events that have not occurred."

During a series of experiments the researchers falsely

suggested to participants that it was known they had become ill after eating egg salad as a child.

A "significant minority" of participants believed this to be true, and even four months after the study were found to avoid egg salad.

The paper, Lasting False Beliefs, is published in the August issue of the journal Psychological Science, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

 www.st-andrews.ac.uk



CON YOURSELF TO LOSE WEIGHT

False memories could help the obese

STUDY: Dr Geraerts

CENTRE PRESS AGENCY

**By Ben Spencer**

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OBESE adults could be brainwashed into losing weight.

Psychologists in Scotland say a technique which implants false memories can turn people off certain foods.

In tests, volunteers were put off egg salad after it was falsely suggested it had made them ill as children.

It is hoped the technique could be used to help people lose weight by putting them off fatty foods like chips and cakes.

Dr Elke Geraerts, a lecturer at St Andrews University, said: "We asked ourselves if false beliefs can be sufficiently strong to alter behaviour. The participants showed a distinct change in attitudes and



AVOIDED: Egg salad

behaviour towards this food, even some time afterwards.

"They avoided egg salad altogether a full four months after we made the simple suggestion.

"With obesity levels reaching epidemic proportions around the world, we could use this type of suggestive therapy for influencing dieting choices.

"It may be possible for people to learn to avoid certain foods by

believing they had negative experiences with the food as a child.

"We have clearly demonstrated that false suggestions about childhood events can profoundly change people's attitudes and behaviour in adulthood."

In the study, 180 Dutch students were implanted with the suggestion that egg salad had made them sick in childhood.

Abuse

A "significant minority" believed the false memory and, as a result, avoided egg salad sandwiches when they were offered them.

The study, published in the journal *Psychological Science*, could have serious implications for cases of alleged child abuse.

It throws weight behind previous research which claimed it is possible for people to create false memories of being abused as a child, when memories are recovered through suggestive therapy.

