

# Philosophy of Nutrition Education

NFSC 660

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There is much urgency surrounding the lifestyles of Americans that need to be addressed through nutrition education and intervention. Throughout the past twenty years, the rate of obesity among Americans has increased dramatically and is remaining high.<sup>1</sup> The poor eating habits of Americans and its effects on their overall health should be emphasized through education, but there is a problem in our society related to misinformation about foods and dietary habits. Proper nutrition education could greatly improve the overall health of our nation, specifically in terms of the quality of the American diet.

Nutrition education is a process by which experts in the field assist people in making decisions regarding their eating practices by applying knowledge from nutrition science associated to the relationship between diet and health.<sup>3</sup> Education in schools, seminars, publications, and in the media offers an additional outlet to contribute to the improvement of the nutritional status of our nation. Improved nutrition of individuals, and therefore of our nation, is an important component of health that leads to an overall better quality of life for our population.

There are many factors that contribute to poor dietary habits such accessibility and availability of foods, busy lifestyles and poor knowledge surrounding diet. It is important to consider with nutrition education that daily nutritional practices are unique for individuals based on their regional, cultural, and economic conditions and patterns. In addition, health problems may differ across populations and for some inadequate nutrients may be the issue, but for others excessive calories may be of concern. Therefore, when developing a nutrition curriculum it is necessary to take into account the diversities of our population and tailor each program to the target group.

Nutrition education should not focus on the memorization of facts, but on behaviors, goals and cognitions. Assessing the needs and interests of the target group is critical in the development of an education program, and then focusing on the specific behaviors most important to the group of interest can then be addressed. Also, screening the target group through survey implementation or focus groups can help to further address influences related to the behavior. After determining objectives of the program, an educator can then design the learning program, with the use of theories and other nutritional materials and ideas, which specifically focus on the behavior change for the target group.

Nutrition education involves teaching the client or group about the importance of nutrition, providing educational materials that are appropriate and that reinforce the specific behavior change, while also teaching skills that are essential for making the dietary change. In addition, one must be provided with information on how to sustain a behavior change. After assessing the motivations of the individual or group, an educator can then develop the appropriate educational program.

Each individual and group may have different learning styles and motivations toward for change. As an educator, it is important to recognize that each individual may learn differently, and therefore combining learning styles and techniques in a lesson may be crucial for the success of the behavior modification. The three most common types of learning styles include visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners, and the incorporation of techniques for each style should be considered when designing an education program.

There are many causes and determinants of behaviors such as perceived benefits, knowledge and the environment. Another determinant of behavior includes that of

support, whether that be social support or individual support from the educator or counselor. In “The Chronic Care Model”, the focus is on responsibility for self-management with the individual, while also emphasizing the importance of structured support. This model provides a way to enhance individual support through the identification of the specific needs of that person. An important consideration for program development is that some may need more structured lessons and support, while others may not. Implementing “The Chronic Care Model” whether in an individual or group setting, can help allow individuals to establish their own goals that as an educator can be reinforced and achieved throughout the process.<sup>2</sup>

There are many goals as an educator that must be considered with nutrition education. Focusing on the specific behavior change is the first necessary component of an effective education program. Whether the behavior change is something general as eating fewer calories, or more specifically consuming 5 or more servings of fruits each day, focus should be emphasized on the specific outcome. Next, addressing influences on behaviors for the individual or target group reveals the ‘why’ portion of the change. Although increasing knowledge through nutrition education is necessary, modifying behaviors that influence dietary behavior is also fundamental for change.<sup>3</sup>

Some common influences of food related behaviors include perceptions, attitudes, feelings, knowledge and convenience. Behaviors are influenced by many factors and addressing these factors through education can assist with behavior change. Factors include personal, emotional, family, society and environmental determinants that affect dietary change. Helping individuals discover the inherent capacity to be responsible for their own life is key when addressing personal factors of behavior change. Before

beginning the actual education, empowering the individual or group to be proactive, setting goals and therefore committing to the change can only increase self-efficacy and the chances of reaching the ultimate goal.<sup>4</sup>

Nutrition education design uses existing theories from the social and behavioral sciences in addition to biological sciences.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, theory attempts to explain how things work, and in this specific case how nutrition education works. Designing nutrition education programs using theories that address behavior change assists an educator in using the individual or group's personal experiences in the lesson, as well as scientific research that can aid in behavior change. Health behavior theories describe the relations among variables that influence a behavior and specify the targets for facilitating a behavior change. Food and dietary behavior, just like an individual or group, is very complex and full of factors. The simplistic model of "knowledge-attitude-behavior" does offer a basic representation of behavior change, but unfortunately behavior change is not always so straightforward.<sup>4</sup>

Nutrition education does not have to be solely based on one dominant theory, instead different constructs from multiple theories should be integrated and applied to help describe and change dietary behaviors. Therefore, a more effective approach for nutrition education should be the integration of specific constructs from theories into one "model", that can be tailored to the dietary change or behavior modification of the individual or group. More than one theory can address the complexities of people and their attitudes and beliefs towards nutrition education and intervention.

Presently, many frequently used theories in nutrition education include similar constructs, however not one theoretical model fully predicts behavior or change.

Therefore, combining constructs into a tailored model for the individual or group seems to be most appropriate for nutrition education and behavioral interventions. For example, within the Social Cognitive Theory, the Health Belief Model, and the Transtheoretical Model are overlapping constructs such as outcome expectancies, perceived benefits, and the ‘pros’ of performing the behavior.<sup>5</sup> The use of multiple theoretical models should be used to better predict the target behavior and help to promote behavior change.

There are important constructs of each theory that can be incorporated into nutrition education. The Health Belief Model, developed in the 1950s, explains psychological readiness for performing simple health-related behaviors. Including constructs from this model for nutrition education programs such as perceived barriers, severity, susceptibility and benefits, can aid in creating an education lesson by identifying the overall barriers and benefits for a specific behavior change.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, The Social Cognitive Theory, founded by Albert Bandura, focuses on combining external and internal factors that influence the behaviors of an individual. However, Bandura’s model incorporates cognitions in addition to environmental stimuli, which he proposed continuously interact to create specific behavioral habits. Incorporating the role of cognitions into education, which represent the individual’s opinions, thoughts and attitudes, can be supportive for a behavioral change. In addition, one key foundation of this theory, different from other theories, is the inclusion of observational learning and modeling. This form of learning may be crucial for a visual learner, thereby incorporating this key component, along with multiple other constructs, can be viewed as a necessary component when creating an educational lesson for a group.<sup>5</sup>

The Transtheoretical Model, developed by Prochaska and DiClemente in 1984, similarly to The Social Cognitive Theory, emphasizes how cognitions can be used to explain behaviors. There are common processes that individuals undergo when making behavior changes, and this theory helps to identify exactly what stage an individual is in dependent on their readiness to perform behavior change. Given the range of ages, ethnicities, nutritional issues, and other variables that may be present in a group educational setting, this specific theory is one where its use, along with other constructs from other theories, would be more applicable to reach a target group, who would not necessarily all be in the same “stage of change”.<sup>5</sup>

According to the Social Cognitive Theory, a personal sense of control facilitates a change of health behavior, and therefore self-efficacy pertains to a sense of control over one’s environment and behavior.<sup>6</sup> Many of the health behavior theories include the construct self-efficacy, or a similar construct related to an individual’s confidence in performing a behavior change. Self-efficacy is a direct predictor of intention and also of behavior and is essentially one’s cognitions that determine whether a behavior change will be initiated, how much effort will be used, and how long the change will be sustained when obstacles arise.<sup>5</sup>

The Theory of Planned Behavior indicates that intention is the most proximal predictor of behavior change.<sup>5</sup> Cognitions that affect a specific intention are attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, which is one’s perception about being able to perform a specific behavior. Self-efficacy and behavioral control can be viewed as identical constructs because perceived behavioral control in essence pertains to one’s thoughts about how easy it is for them to complete the behavior change.

Furthermore, according to the Transtheoretical Model, self-efficacy and perceived positive and negative outcomes are the main social cognitive variables that change across the “stages of change”. Typically, in the early stages such as precontemplation, self-efficacy is low, however when individuals move on to later stages such as action, self-efficacy increase.<sup>5</sup>

Nutrition education approaches have and will continue to progress and change with our society. As an educator, it is important to consider new methods and styles of education related to eating practices and incorporate them into lessons when appropriate. A more recent approach to changing how one views food and eating is the “Mindful Eating” approach. Mindful eating is defined as when an individual acknowledges responses to food without judgment and listens to internal cues from the body.<sup>7</sup> This way of eating puts emphasis on learning to be aware of physical hunger and satiety cues to guide the decisions to begin eating and to stop eating. Choosing what to eat should be both enjoyable and pleasing, while also nourishing the body by using all the senses to explore the actual food and taking the time to enjoy the processes of eating.<sup>7</sup>

The principles of “Mindfulness” are synonymous to many constructs and concepts of traditional behavior change and learning theories. Mindfulness is about paying attention and becoming non-judgmental with food. Also, mindfulness encompasses both internal processes and external environments (cues). The roles of cognitions are present in many fundamental theories and “mindfulness” simply emphasizes one’s cognitions and thoughts more than any other variable with a behavior change related to eating. Mindfulness is about being aware of what is present mentally,

emotionally and physical in each moment while promoting balance, choice and acceptance surrounding food.<sup>8</sup>

Incorporating the mindful or non-diet approach to eating, in the same way as incorporating constructs from many theories when developing a program or lesson, can create a modern “polytheoretical” model that is tailored to the target group or individual.<sup>3</sup> As a nutrition educator it is certainly important to assess all avenues when developing a program and the nutrition field is one where new ideas and approaches are often being developed. Mindfulness is one of the more current ‘theories’ related to eating behavior, which can be used alongside other constructs from traditional theories to target those that loose touch with their bodies, hungers and desires, which are common issues for those struggling with an eating behavior. Essentially, both traditional theories and the mindfulness approach identify barriers, benefits and cues for eating.

Nutrition educators should inform the public in a language that can be seen as universal among the population. The complexities of nutrition and food are endless and there have been many great efforts towards understanding the diet. Therefore, the public needs to receive consists messages related to nutrition, especially with the rapidly growing number of new foods available to consumers.

A forecast for the field of nutrition, using nutrition education for behavior modification, includes the development of theories specific to food and nutrition behavior changes. Effective education programs should focus on both how to promote action and motivation.<sup>6</sup> A foundation has been put in place for nutrition educators with traditional theories to explain behavior in a general sense, however, with the field evolving and new

ideas and methods being introduced for eating behavior, a theoretical approach specifically to nutrition and food seems inevitable for the field.

While developing effective nutrition education programs, it is important to individualize each program while integrating constructs from many theories that have been confirmed to explain or predict nutrition related behaviors. Under most conditions, utilizing many theories, models, and disciplines seems to best reflect a patient focused practice, where each program is tailored to the individuals' needs. By improving food habits through nutrition education, it can directly result in a more positive health a well-being for the population.

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