

Navigating the diet culture paradox

5 consumer misconceptions that are keeping people from engaging in employer-sponsored programs that could make a true impact on their health



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Research shows consumers are losing their trust in weight loss solutions, and diet culture is to blame. People think they're the ones failing at diets—when really, the diets are failing them. With hundreds of programs featuring the latest gimmicks and promising a quick fix, there's a gap between expectations and results, leading to frustration and feelings of failure.



Research tells us that there are five key paradoxes around diet culture that may prevent consumers from wanting to engage in weight management programs.



Here's what we found from surveying 1,000 consumers across the U.S. from a range of diverse backgrounds, regions, education levels, ethnicities, and ages.

Paradox #1: Consumers don't think diets will work for *them*.

There are hundreds of programs out there—like meal replacements, point tracking, and calorie counting. People have seen these programs and diets work for others, but don't feel that they will work for their lifestyle, causing many to “quit” before they even start.

But the problem isn't consumers.

When short-sighted programs fail to consider diverse cultures, lifestyles, and overall health improvement goals, they'll only be successful for a very narrow population.

Paradox #2: People want long-lasting results—FAST.

It's hard to shake common weight loss and diet culture misconceptions. Consumers have unrealistic expectations and may not know what is most effective for sustainable weight loss—leading to frustration when they don't see immediate results, or when the weight comes back.

Paradox #3: People want to feel better, not just look better.

Bottom line: people want to feel better. There's a common perception that people's primary motivation to lose weight is to look better. But what's actually driving change is that people are tired of the burden of pain and illness that often comes with falling into an obese or overweight category.

Paradox #4: People have misconceptions about how to lose weight.

People rank behaviors that are clinically-proven to drive weight loss as “unimportant.” Even though the science says otherwise, consumers have been conditioned to think certain factors like extreme exercise or restrictive diets are the most critical to losing weight.

Paradox #5: People think behavioral programs seem too good to be true.

Though consumers are highly interested in a solution based on behavioral science, they also think that behavior change programs seem “too good to be true.” Toxic diet culture messaging is deeply rooted in most people's belief systems, though evidence suggests the tides are turning.

Paradox I: Consumers don't think diets will work for them.

People want to lose weight, but they've lost trust in weight loss solutions because they don't work for their individual needs and lifestyle.

Of the survey respondents that had previously tried a weight-loss program, 57.5% reported mixed experiences. The most popular programs were among the least successful. **Moreover, most programs lost half or more of their members within three months.** Among reasons for leaving the programs were "too expensive," "unsustainable," or "unsuccessful."

They don't think conventional weight loss programs work.

Consumers see the value in pursuing a weight loss program, but have issues following through and reaching their desired goals with conventional programs.

People are tired of being played by gimmicks.

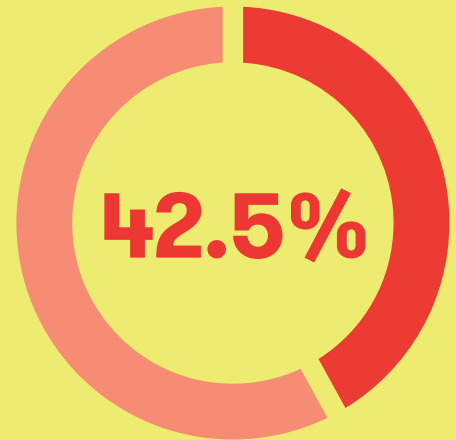
Less than 15% of people were attracted to marketing-related factors (celebrity endorsements, cool names, general name recognition). Instead, they want a user-friendly program that actually works. Almost half of the respondents valued a science-based program—and resources for learning and tracking tools topped the list as desired features.

Access to meal planning and recipes led the priorities list, followed by:

- food tracking
- workout programs
- activity tracking
- personalized tips based on the data they provide before and during participation in the program

HOW MANY PEOPLE QUIT BEFORE THEY EVEN START?

In our consumer survey, we asked people why they never started a weight loss program. Here's what we found:



OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS
NEVER ENGAGED WITH A
PROGRAM BECAUSE:

65.6%

SAID PROGRAMS THEY LOOKED
INTO WERE TOO EXPENSIVE

33.2%

SAID THAT NONE OF THE
OPTIONS APPEALED TO THEM

50% +

MOST PROGRAMS LOST HALF
OR MORE OF THEIR MEMBERS
WITHIN THREE MONTHS

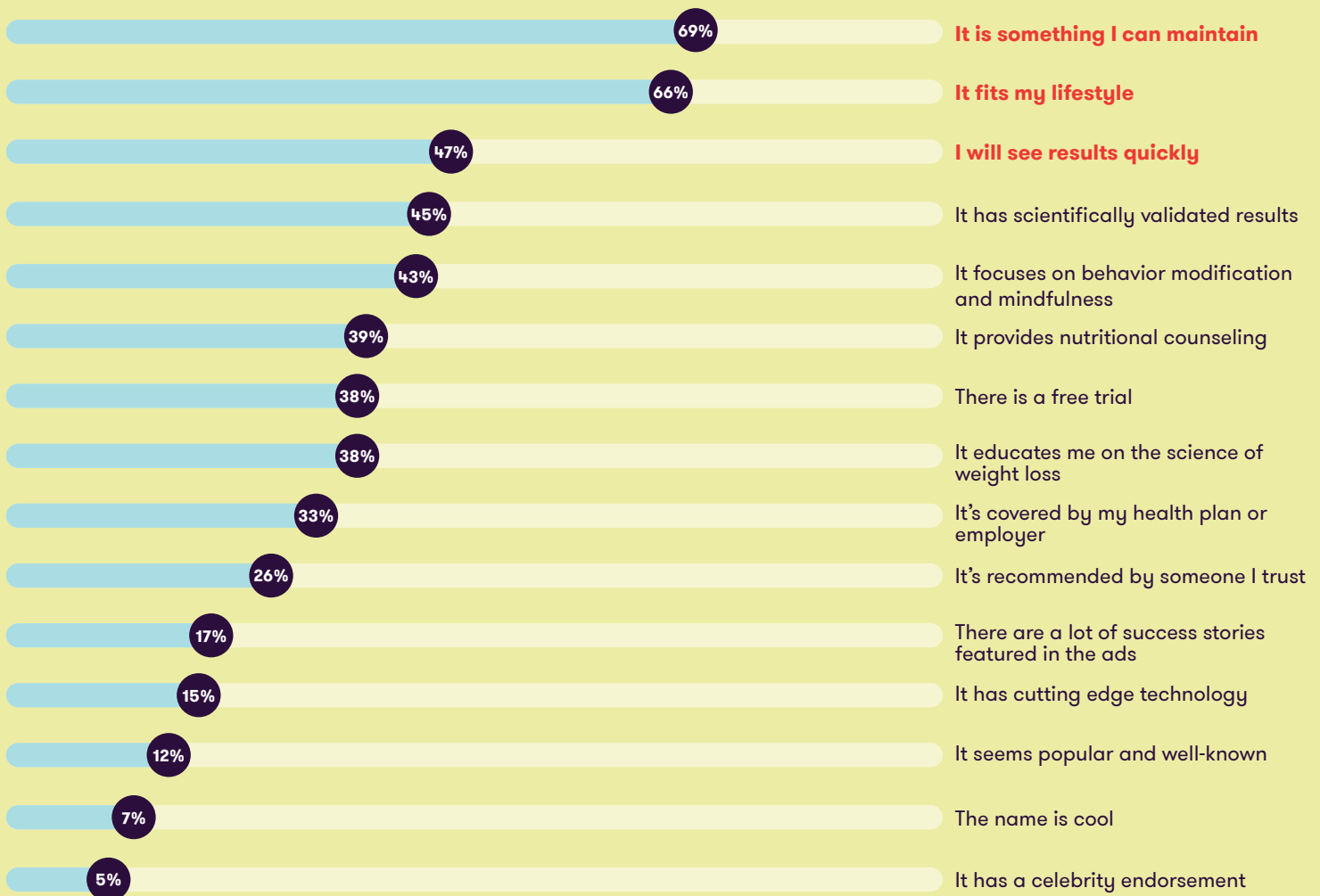
EMPLOYER TAKEAWAY: Choosing the trendy weight loss program is hurting your bottom line. Research shows the most popular programs lose over half their members within three months. So, the blenders and scales might make a short-term impact, but after the first few months, that engagement will fizzle out, and so will the positive effect on your claims reports and your culture.

Paradox 2: Consumers want long-lasting results—FAST.

Sustainability was top of people's wish lists, followed closely by seeing quick results. The issue is that those two don't usually go hand-in-hand. This juxtaposition can create unrealistic expectations and added pressure when starting a program—a recipe for disaster.



Top qualities of a weight loss program



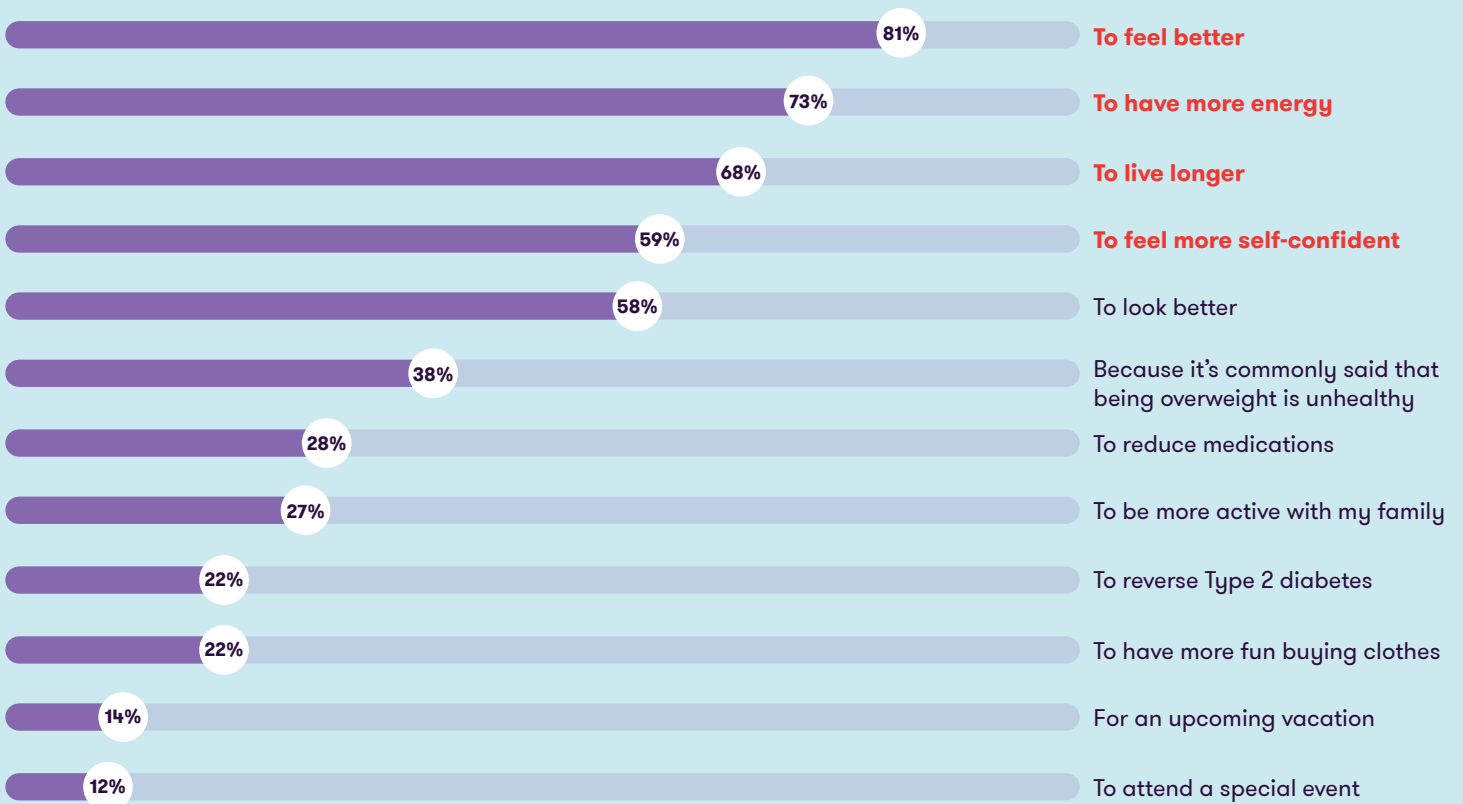
EMPLOYER TAKEAWAY: Fad diets create boomerang claims, not lasting results. Claims from popular weight loss solutions create unrealistic expectations and put people on a vicious cycle of weight gain and loss that shows up in your healthcare claims costs. To make the greatest impact, employers need partners that deliver sustainable results that employees can maintain in the long run.



Paradox 3: People want to feel better, not just look better.

The top reasons people want to start a weight loss program may be surprising: to **feel better, have more energy, live longer, and be more self-confident**. Weight management comes down to more than just a number on the scale. More than the pounds they hope to shed, people crave what they gain from weight loss—better overall quality of life.

Reasons people want to participate in a weight loss program



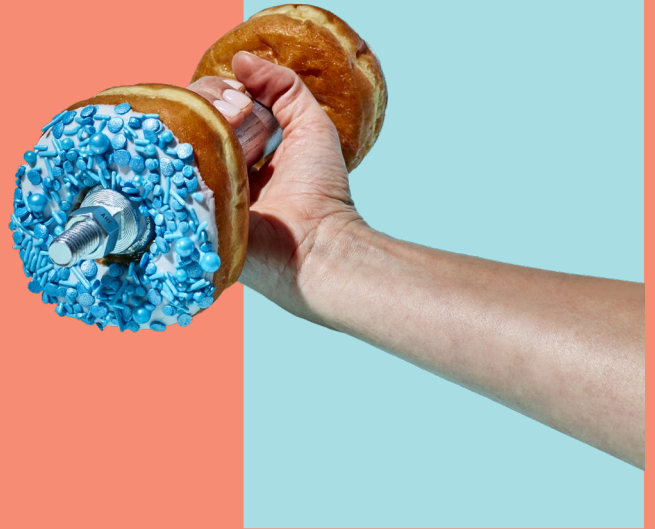
EMPLOYER TAKEAWAY: Behavior change is the real driver of engagement. Ultimately people want to feel better and live longer. Prioritizing and choosing weight management partners that focus on whole health outcomes that support overall health and lifestyle goals will keep employees engaged in your programs and from becoming high-cost claimants.

Paradox 4: Consumers have misconceptions about how to lose weight.

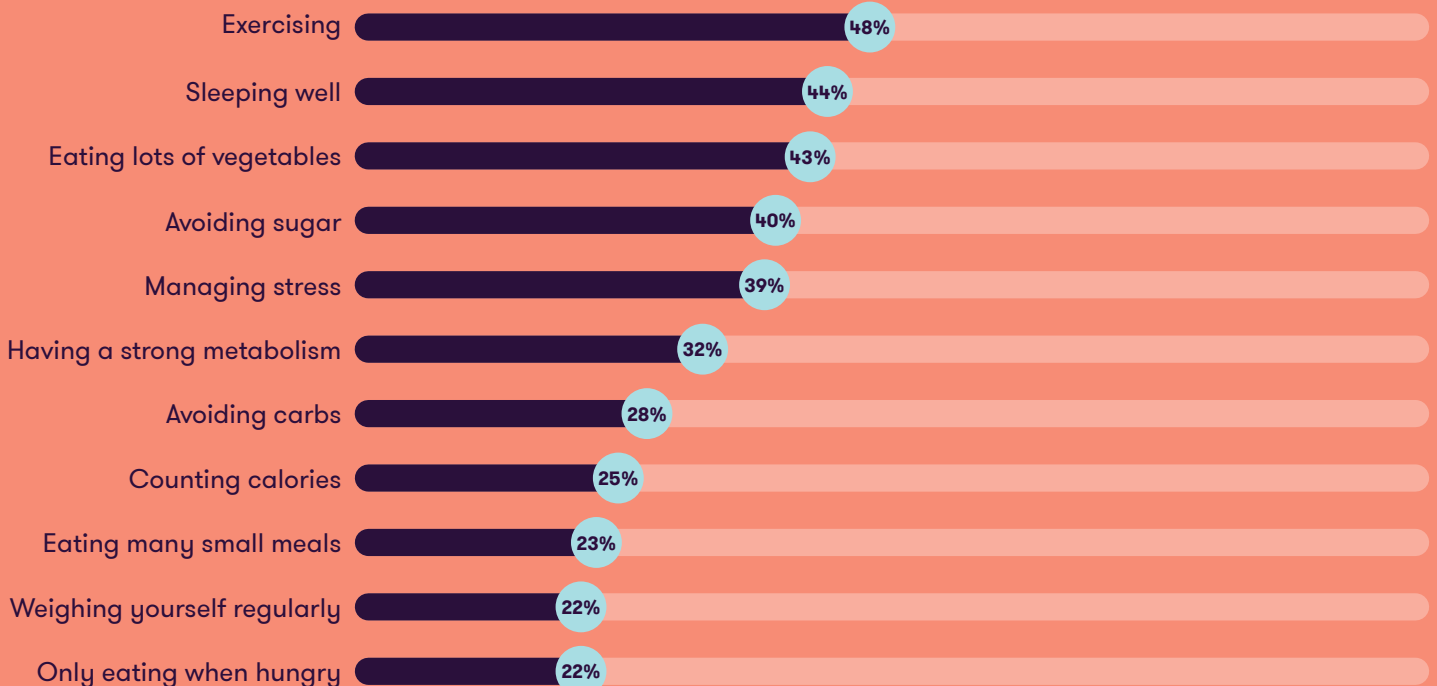
Survey respondents concluded that many factors are needed to contribute to a successful weight loss regimen—though there were misconceptions about what can be most effective.

Nearly half (48%) considered working out extremely important to weight loss. More than 40% ranked three other health staples—sleeping well, eating lots of vegetables, and avoiding sugar—as being extremely important. Conversely, eating only when they're hungry tied for last place.

The real brain buster? Studies show that eating—not exercise or diet—plays a critical role in overall weight management systems.^{1,2}



Factors needed for a successful weight loss program



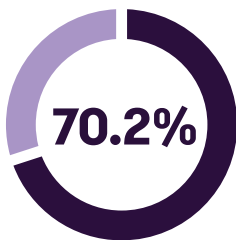
EMPLOYER TAKEAWAY: People are confused about how to manage their weight. Employers have a unique opportunity to cut through the diet culture noise and make a real impact through education and behavioral-based solutions. When it comes down to it, sustainable results from these programs will go beyond improving employee health to have a broader impact on claims costs and employers' bottom lines.

Paradox 5:

Consumers think behavioral programs seem too good to be true.

Based on their previous responses of wanting a program that fits their lifestyle and produces lasting results, the research shows that people are interested in behavior change programs. To test the theory, we put together a blind description of our existing Wondr™ weight loss program and renamed it “Program X” to gather respondents’ unbiased feedback.

Introducing a digital program that helps you build healthier habits to lose weight and boost overall quality of life—no dieting needed. By teaching you simple skills to change when and how you eat, instead of what you eat, you don’t have to give up the foods you love. Plus, it helps you create other healthy habits for increased physical activity, better sleep, lowering stress, and feeling more in control over your health long-term. Finally, a program that works in the real world!



would like to try Program X

An overwhelming majority of respondents said they’d like to try Program X based on the description.



BUT

of respondents described it as too good to be true

A large portion didn’t fully trust a program without dieting or restrictions.

WHAT APPEALED TO PEOPLE MOST ABOUT PROGRAM X?

- The ability to build healthier habits
- Boosts quality of life
- Does not involve dieting
- Changes when and how you eat rather than what you eat
- Helps create other healthy habits
- Puts people more in control of their health long-term

People care about seeing results, improving their overall wellbeing, and a sustainable program that fits their lifestyle.

While a majority said they’d like to try Program X and reacted positively, 40% of respondents described it as “too good to be true”—showing how it seems hard to disassociate weight loss from straight calorie-counting diets and the pervasiveness of diet culture misconceptions.



EMPLOYER TAKEAWAY: Diet culture has created a world where people expect disappointment yet, they are willing to try almost anything to lose weight. To make a true impact on claims costs, employers need to flip the scale by partnering with programs that deliver sustainable results with a proven financial, clinical, and cultural ROI.

Learn more about Wondr Health.

Visit: wondrhealth.com/employers

CITATIONS

Consumer report data gathered from a third-party survey commissioned by Naturally Slim

1. Cox, Carla E. “Role of Physical Activity for Weight Loss and Weight Maintenance.” *Diabetes spectrum* : a publication of the American Diabetes Association vol. 30,3 (2017): 157-160. doi:10.2337/ds17-0013

2. Miller C. K. (2017). Mindful Eating With Diabetes. *Diabetes spectrum* : a publication of the American Diabetes Association, 30(2), 89-94. <https://doi.org/10.2337/ds16-0039>