

Magical thinking helps dieters cope with unrealistic expectations

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Magical thinking, usually dismissed as naïve and irrational, can actually help consumers cope with stressful situations like trying to lose weight, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Magical thinking occurs when an individual invokes mystical, supernatural forces to understand, predict, or even influence events to overcome these stressful situations," write authors Yannik St. James (HEC Montreal), Jay M. Handelman, and Shirley F. Taylor (both Queen's University, Kingston, Canada).

"Weight loss activities are stressful for a number of reasons: being overweight is associated with several negative health consequences as well as considerable social stigma," the authors write. "Consumers are expected to conform to unrealistic cultural ideals of slenderness and they are simultaneously enticed to indulge in abundant, highly caloric, processed food."

To cope with these conflicting pressures and expectations, consumers engage in various forms of magical thinking. They describe weight loss as being influenced by mysterious forces, such as a body that "conspires" against them or food that "seduces" them. They also hope that good deeds will be rewarded (like eating chips without consequences after eating cabbage soup all day) and resort to "magical solutions" like fad diets. Finally, they try to fool the scale by changing to lighter clothing or exercising before being weighed.

These magical thinkers are not misinformed, the authors emphasize. "By invoking and negotiating with mystical forces, consumers actively work to create uncertainty and ambiguity as a way to generate hope and possibility in a cultural domain where they otherwise experience very little," the authors write.

The authors believe their findings should be of interest to consumer advocates and policy makers. "Programs directed at correcting fallacious consumer knowledge and enjoining consumers to exert greater self-control might be of limited value," the authors write. "Indeed, these approaches eliminate certain consumer coping strategies without affecting the source of stress—the cultural expectation to be thin in a culture that entices consumers with endless unhealthy food and lifestyle alternatives."

More information: Yannik St. James, Jay M. Handelman, and Shirley F. Taylor. "Magical Thinking and Consumer Coping." Published online May 3, 2011. Journal of Consumer Research: December 2011. ejcr.org

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