

Contingency Plans



Show slide 15 – Do not say what you are not going to do.

This slide shows the results of a study involving female students who wanted to lose weight. When they came to the research lab they were told the researchers wanted to help them eat fewer unhealthy snacks, and in particular less chocolate, because this is an unhealthy snack female students generally consume too much.

The women were asked to describe in one word their critical cue for eating chocolate (this could be any cue they considered relevant such as a time of day, a feeling, or an activity). In the example we used “when I’m sad”.

They were then assigned to one of the 3 strategies.

- The first was simple.
- The second was a little more complicated, but did not focus on the dealing with issues constructively.
- The third took issues that might arise into consideration and added a contingency plan if things went wrong. They knew that it was likely that they would crave chocolate at some point and thought of a way to build in a back up plan. This group was the only group that kept their weight under control. As you can see the second group actually ate the most calories.

They would rehearse what their dieting strategy was by writing it down on a questionnaire. They then left the lab and kept track of the snacks they ate during the following week. The graph shows the numbers of calories of unhealthy snacks they ate.

As you can see, the punishment intention (group 2) backfired: those women ate more unhealthy snacks than the women in group 1 and 3. This shows that it's more motivating for people to come up with a contingency plan. If we have thought about what to do when a challenging situation comes up we are more likely to persevere.

As you can see from this example, if you do not consider what can go wrong your plan is likely to fail.