



### SO EASY TO GAIN IT, SO DIFFICULT TO LOSE IT. GIVING MEANING TO LIFE WHEN BEING OVERWEIGHT OR OBESE COMPLICATES IT

Costa, M and López, E.  
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It is always a pleasure for me to present in this journal a book by Miguel Costa and Ernesto López. Even more so, in this case, since I was part of the team of the Center for the Promotion of Healthy Habits of the City Council of Madrid in the years when the program of healthy eating and physical activity was launched, when Miguel Costa managed the center. This program is, for me, therefore, not just something that a book is about, but an activity whose birth and development I witnessed every day.

The book certainly includes a set of procedures to promote change in the habits related to eating and physical activity, and therefore overweight. But it is much more than that.

The part of the book specifically dedicated to detailed guidelines and procedures, to which, perhaps, a hasty reader would immediately turn (mistakenly) for "the practical bit", occupies Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Here we find up-to-date and highly recommended information on nutrition (Chapter 4) and physical activity (Chapter 5) and especially, specific guidance on how to promote change in both behavioral areas. The strategies of environmental re-design, aimed at making the habit changes "easier", are so important in this book that they have a specific chapter of their own, Chapter 6.

However, as I pointed out earlier, this book is much more than a set of guidelines for weight loss, however effective and accurate these may be. If it were so, it would not be very different from so many other publications. Chapters 2 and 3 set out the conceptual and strategic basis of the sections I have already mentioned. They are, in my opinion, the most "juicy" part of the book, because the approach is completely different from the traditional one, and it is on these chapters, above all, that I will concentrate in the scarce space available to me.

The authors' strategic proposal is based on a theory of behavior, the "ABC model", whose exhibition always occupies a prominent place in all of their publications because it is what gives meaning and foundation to the applied aspects. Chapter 2 is dedicated to this question. In summary, it is emphasized that the behaviors that are at the origin of overweight cannot be understood in isolation, but are part of constellations of behaviors linked by mutual implications, and lifestyles that are complex and unique and firmly rooted in the contexts and circumstances of life. It is a radically contextual perspective. Thus, we are shown the power of socioeconomic inequalities on the "epidemic" of obesity, or the determining role of the obesogenic environments in which children often live: environments that do not lend themselves to playing in the street; deficits in sports equipment or leisure; accessibility of high-calorie foods and drinks; computer or mobile phone use; sedentary leisure habits; family risk practices, family modeling, etc. The role of the perceptual dimension is also shown, of certain verbal rules (such as the dichotomous approach), or of the operative, functional, adaptive character, which in transactions with the contexts can acquire certain habits of unhealthy eating or restriction of physical activity.

But the core of the book is, in my opinion, Chapter 3 (*Changing the way of living and giving meaning to life*) where the strategic lines proposed by the authors, derived from the explanatory principles presented in the previous chapter are synthesized, and from which the guidelines proposed in later chapters are deduced. It offers twenty or so

strategic principles for "reorienting life", of which I would like to highlight a few:

- ✓ *Adopting a comprehensive approach, including changes in contexts and lifestyles beyond focusing on dietary recommendations and calorie counts.* The goal is a positive goal, which is not merely reduced to losing weight, let alone losing weight rapidly. We are accustomed to thinking that this is a problem whose solution has to do with calorie counting, inflexible diets and plans of hard physical exercise. This book also includes dietary guidelines and physical activity, but, in my opinion, this is not its fundamental element. The book goes further and aims, as the title says, to give meaning to life when overweight complicates it; which involves an element of acceptance (not of resignation), but also an element of invitation to change. One is invited to contemplate the process of change and loss of weight not as a struggle, a sacrifice and a renunciation, but instead as an opportunity to enrich and fill life with meaning, even if the goal of weight loss is delayed or even if it is not reached. It is, therefore, a comprehensive approach, which has to do with lifestyle and with a reorientation of the life project as a whole.
- ✓ *Adopting a flexible approach to decisions, contrary to absolute prohibitions.* This is a contribution of particular interest because it poses a questioning and a change from the traditional, restrictive approach, rigid and based on dietary prohibitions, which is so daunting to those facing this problem, and which is at the base of the endless cycle of restrictive and rigid diet – suffering – abandoning the diet – going back to old habits – weight regain – new diet, also known as the "yo-yo effect". Against this approach, in the book the authors propose what they call a "broad, calm and flexible approach," centered on the concept of *green and red decisions*: instead of offering a list of prohibited foods that must not be eaten under any circumstances, and highly demanding obligations of physical activity, it is the users themselves who, at each moment in their daily life, make decisions on whether or not to eat a certain food, and in what quantity, or on whether to go out to take a walk or stay on the sofa watching an interesting television program. The goal, of course, is for the frequency of "green" decisions to be superior to that of the "red" decisions, but without absolute prohibitions, because these are the origin of the failure of restrictive diets. When working in the long term, there is evidence of better results from this flexible approach.
- ✓ *Learning that it is personal decisions, in each moment, that determine whether you eat a piece of cake or stay on the couch watching TV.* The individual experiences certain thoughts, emotions or desires, even very intense ones, but it is not those that govern the behavior. Thus, the aim of the intervention is not to fight against the urge to eat an appetizing cake or against the temptation of a comfortable sofa – desires and temptations that will inevitably continue to exist –, but rather it is to make personal decisions, taking those desires and temptations into consideration, in order to achieve a valuable goal. All of this does not, of course, exclude the adoption of necessary measures (stimulus control and others) to make healthy choices easier and more likely.
- ✓ *Adopting a slow, calm, long-term approach, contrary to the frequent aim, fed by so many sellers of miracle diets, to lose as many pounds as possible in the shortest possible time period, which is at the root of so many nutritional risks and rapid regain of the weight lost after a certain time.* It is not just about losing weight, but about adopting an active lifestyle that includes healthy eating, which will involve losing weight in the medium and long term, and in all likelihood maintaining the weight loss over time.





- ✓ *Claiming and accepting one's own body as it is, as well as personal competences and abilities*, also reconciling this acceptance with the admission of the possibility of change. Regardless of whether weight is lost, it is about learning to live with overweight and obesity, based on a questioning of the social demands of thinness.
- ✓ *Focusing the attention of professionals and dedicating time and effort to the often neglected goal of first achieving a personal decision and commitment to change*. This objective is a priority, especially at the beginning of the process, and a constant reference throughout it. Achieving this commitment to a personal decision of quality involves the professional adopting a strategy of validation towards the frequent (and legitimate) ambivalences, doubts and fears of the user.
- ✓ *This personal decision and commitment are based on the identification of what constitutes life objectives that are valuable to the individual*, from which (and not from external impositions, however well-intentioned) the foundation, direction and persistence of the process of change are formed. The process of professional help, therefore, includes *an inquiry into one's own values*, about where one wishes to guide one's life, and a process of promoting personal decision-making. It is certainly a complex process. The construction of this personal decision and the set of processes that see it through to the end is not something that is achieved merely, as is usually the aim, with well-intentioned information and warnings.
- ✓ *Monitoring one's language and, in particular, rethinking certain verbal rules*. Language has an important role in decision-making processes, and certain verbal rules (such as the "all or nothing" approach or the substitution of "I really fancy it" for "I need it") have to be questioned.

I leave till the end the reference to two issues dealt with in the book that could be considered secondary or complementary. They appear at the beginning and at the end of the book (Chapters 1 and 7, respectively), but without them the problem at hand cannot be fully understood. Chapter 1 presents the magnitude of the phenomenon of overweight and explains it

from an evolutionary perspective in the context of the drastic change in the living conditions of mankind in terms of the availability of food and the physical effort necessary to obtain it. This change began only a few thousand years ago, with the invention of agriculture in the Neolithic period, and has intensified tremendously in recent decades, at least in the developed world. Let us think, without going too far back, of the spectacular increase in the proportion of overweight people in the last 50 years in our country, a phenomenon that is difficult to understand without reference to the changes in living conditions in the same period. Beyond the sterile view of obesity as a "disease" or the easy attribution of its causes to genetic factors, an evolutionary and contextual vision is imposed both from a population perspective and an individual perspective. Chapter 7, which concludes the book, is a masterly synthesis to which one can turn in order to understand in some detail the biological processes involved in energy balance and, therefore, overweight.

I cannot resist one final reflection on the role and attitude of psychologists in all this. The problem of overweight is approached almost exclusively by professionals in medicine and nursing, whose most frequent opinion can be summarized in the idea that "psychological aspects" or "emotions" are "very important" in these processes and, therefore, must be "taken into account". In any case, the intervention of the psychologist is aimed at peripheral or complementary aspects of the problem, which can be specified in one or two sessions of the program that deal specifically with these "psychological" issues (defined in an ambiguous and interpretable way, depending on the professional working on the case) while the core aspects of the problem, i.e., what is truly important, are of another type and it is the task of other professionals to deal with them. Unfortunately, numerous psychologists seem to identify and feel comfortable with this approach. It is a merit of this book, written by psychologists, that it reminds us that the origin of overweight has its explanation in certain behaviors, and that psychology is precisely the science that deals with unraveling the mysteries of behavior and indicating the strategies for its modification.

