Online and face-to-face: How do ad-hoc and existing networks support weight-related behavior change in young adults?

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Researchers frequently examine how ad-hoc or existing networks provide social support for weight loss but do not evaluate how these networks serve complementary purposes. Ad-hoc networks (e.g., strangers who form a network based on shared goals) may provide support that existing (e.g., friendship) networks do not. This study describes how overweight/obese college students participating in a 2-year remotely delivered weight loss trial (SMART: a Social and Mobile Approach to Reduce Weight) engaged their existing networks and leveraged SMART (i.e., their ad-hoc network) to meet their weight-loss goals. Fifteen treatment and 14 control participants (N =29) were interviewed and transcripts were analyzed using principles from grounded theory. The first aim was to understand the similarities and differences between SMART and participants’ existing networks. Five themes emerged: accountability, motivation, trusted source of information, and “on demand” support. Participants’ felt accountable to deliver on their weight-loss intentions from the SMART network and their existing networks. Encouragement from friends and SMART motivated participants to stay on track. SMART was viewed as a trusted source of information and available “on demand.” The second aim was to explore how support was provided by and enlisted from the SMART network (treatment arm only). Two themes emerged: directive vs. autonomous support and privacy vs. openness. The eHealth coach provided mostly directive informational and appraisal support whereas participants’ existing networks provided mostly autonomous emotional support. Some participants were open to sharing weight-related information/behavior online whereas others prioritized privacy. Friendship networks provide non-judgmental emotional support, which is different from an eHealth coach’s expert support and advice. Individuals with access to complementary sources of support may be best equipped to meet their weight-loss goals.

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