

INTERVIEW:

Sohee Lee



You've recently returned to school to obtain your master's degree in psychology. On your podcast with Layne Norton, [Physique Science Radio](#), you stated a desire to expand on research looking at eating behaviors – particularly examining differences between a macros versus habit-based dietary intervention. Could you give us an overview of the study you want to conduct and what drew you to this topic?

Of course! I chose this topic for my master's thesis because it's something I've been curious about for a few years now. Most of us know about macros-based coaching at this point – prescribing a set number of grams of protein, carbs, and fats to consume per day depending on your individual needs – as it has exploded in popularity over the years. The habits-based coaching is newer and slowly but surely gaining traction. Its focus is not on weighing food or counting calories but rather on daily eating behaviors that you master over time.

My questions concern which of the two methods is more successful for weight loss maintenance in the long-term as well as their effects on psychological measures – binge eating, emotional eating, cognitive restraint, habit strength, and so on. Ultimately, what people truly want when they strive to shed body fat is to not only get it off but keep it off over the long haul. We have yet to come up with a viable solution for that.

I believe that the habits-based coaching method is great for individuals who need to gain a solid grasp of the basic rocks of nutrition first and foremost, whereas the macros-based approach is fit more for advanced nutrition clients who need tinkering in the finer details with their diets. My study will be testing this also.

Psychological aspects of fitness and nutrition coaching can often be underutilized or not well understood. What is one concept you think coaches could greatly benefit from if incorporated into their practice?

From the coaches' side, I would say that compassion is a key component to achieving success with your client. I've worked with several coaches myself who used shame tactics who try to force their clients to stick to their programs, and that's not a long-term strategy. You should want your clients to know and feel that you're both on the same team. If your client is struggling, wouldn't you want him

or her to feel comfortable opening up to you and asking you for help?

Ultimately, your goal as the coach should be to help your clients achieve their fitness goals in a safe and healthy manner. That includes making sure that they feel heard and cared for, plus paying attention to any red flags that pop up that tell you if and when you should hit the brakes.

Having now coached some 1,000+ clients, what is the most common psychological mistake you see people making in their fitness/nutrition/health journey? Do you find it differs depending on what their goal is (i.e. weight gain vs weight loss)?

The biggest psychological mistake is failing to see the big picture in the journey. So many individuals obsess over the minutiae, such as day-to-day fluctuations in scale weight, a slight overshooting of macros, one mediocre workout.... They forget that it's not one action in isolation, but rather behaviors repeated week after week and month and after month that yield results. In order to accomplish this, it's so important to enjoy what you're doing. That means you should like the way you eat and you should look forward to your workouts. This applies to weight gain and weight loss goals alike.

The flexible dieting approach has become increasingly popular in recent years – almost as a countermovement to the myriad of restrictive or elimination diets commonly promoted on social media. Have you ever experienced a situation with a client where flexible dieting did not work for them? If so, what solutions were you able to make work for them?

The very few times flexible dieting did not quite work for clients of mine have been when they have abused the diet. Rather than recognizing that it's about eating mostly nutrient-dense foods with a sprinkling of discretionary calories, they almost made it a game to see how much junk food they could get away with per day while still meeting their daily macronutrient allotment.

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It's actually not so fun when you do it like that, and it's completely missing the point. They're of the mindset of, "I'm technically allowed to eat this, therefore I absolutely should!" Instead, I've gently nudged them toward thinking of treats as a way to satisfy cravings, and I remind them that eating *more* of something doesn't always make for a better experience. One cookie that's fully enjoyed in the moment can go a lot further than four cookies inhaled in a frenzy.

Here's the thing: flexible dieting is a mindset more than an actual diet. In that way, I think it's a bit of a misnomer. In actuality, the main component of flexible dieting is understanding that no foods are off-limits, and any food that you choose to eat is your choice alone. You're eating it because you want to, not because you have to, and conversely, if you don't eat something, that's by choice rather than by active restriction. There are no foods that you absolutely have to eat (or not eat!) to be considered a flexible dieter. Rather, you simply need to exercise autonomy with your food selection.

What is a psychological concept that is widely misunderstood or misapplied within the nutrition and fitness community?

Self-control, hands down. When it comes to achieving fitness goals, so many people believe that it's all about having more self-control, or willpower. For example, when you see a lean and fit individual exercising diligently early in the morning five days a week, you might think that it's because he or she obviously has so much more willpower than the rest of us. However, it's actually more that he or she has established better eating and exercise habits than the general population. That is, they rely on automatic processes with little cognitive effort to conduct the target behavior.

Do you want lasting change? Then think long-term and adopt behaviors that you can keep up month after month. Extremes are not likely to cut it; stick to what you can consistently do.

It was such an exciting moment for me a few months back to see that many of my thoughts about behavior change that I'd gleaned from observing and working with clients for over five years were confirmed in the academic literature. I highly recommend following [Wendy Wood at USC](#) if you're interested in this area; she's conducted a lot of research on habits. ♦

Sohee Lee is a health coach and fitness writer specializing in helping women develop healthy relationships with food and their bodies while getting them to their fitness goals. She is a certified strength and conditioning specialist through the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA-CSCS), a certified sports nutritionist through the International Society of Sports Nutrition (CISSN), and an IFPA professional bikini competitor. She obtained her bachelor's degree in Human Biology from Stanford University in 2012. Currently, she is pursuing her master's degree in psychology at Arizona State University, working in the Health Behavior Lab to study the psychology of eating behavior, with an anticipated graduation date of May 2018.

She recently wrote a book, *Eat. Lift. Thrive.* with Human Kinetics that is all about mastering your unique mindset, training, and nutrition journey for lifelong results. You can find her at [SoheeFit.com](#).