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This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:
Gostoli, S., LO DATO, E., Sprio, E., Petroni, M.L., Tomba, E. (2024). Promoting positive mental health for sustainable eating behaviors: the PROMISE study in patients with obesity. PSYCHOTHERAPY AND PSYCHOSOMATICS, 93(Suppl. 1), 148-148.

Availability:
This version is available at: https://hdl.handle.net/11585/985654 since: 2024-09-19

Published:
DOI: http://doi.org/

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10 September 2026

Promoting positive mental health for sustainable eating behaviors: the PROMISE study in patients with obesity

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Background: A significant increase in obesity and overweight rates, strongly associated with unhealthy and non-sustainable eating habits, has been observed in the last decades. Despite the existence of standardized treatments for obesity, several psychological factors, including altered psychological well-being levels, dysfunctional eating styles and cognitive justification mechanisms use, often hinder the achievement of treatment goals. The present study is aimed at testing the effects and the effectiveness, both post-treatment and at 1-month follow-up (FU) of a psychological group intervention based on the principles of Well-Being Therapy (WBT) combined with a basic nutritional intervention (BNI) with a specific focus on the topic of sustainable eating, compared to BNI only, in terms of weight loss, promotion of healthy and sustainable eating behaviors and optimal psychological functioning in patients with obesity.

Methods: 40 patients with obesity recruited at Sant'Orsola Hospital in Bologna will be randomly assigned to the experimental group (WBT+BNI) (n=20) or to the control group (BNI) (n=20). To assess anthropometric variables, eating habits and psychological functioning during the three time-points, both groups will fill in a self-report online questionnaire including Sustainable and Healthy Dietary Behaviors (SHDB) questionnaire, Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBs), Dutch Eating Behavior Questionnaire (DEBQ), Depression and Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) and an ad-hoc form to assess the use of cognitive justification mechanisms.

Results: It is expected that patients in the WBT+BNI group will achieve a greater weight-loss, engage in more sustainable and healthier eating behaviors, show more balanced levels of PWB and reduced levels of psychological distress, dysfunctional eating styles and dysfunctional justification mechanisms use compared to the BNI group, both post-treatment and at 1-month FU. Conclusion: Since altered psychological well-being levels, dysfunctional eating styles and justification mechanisms often represent an obstacle to the achievement of treatment goals in patients with obesity, the inclusion of these variables in multidisciplinary interventions for obesity might have important clinical implications. In addition to this, considering the central role of non-sustainable eating in this condition, treatment plans might benefit from interventions specifically aimed at promoting more sustainable and healthier diets.