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A qualitative study on strategies to overcome demotivation, burnout, and boredom in weight loss among women in reproductive age

Studi kualitatif tentang strategi mengatasi demotivasi, kejenuhan, dan kebosanan dalam proses penurunan berat badan pada wanita usia subur

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Abstract

The rising prevalence of obesity among adults, particularly women, highlights the need for effective weight management strategies. While previous studies have explored weight loss adherence, limited research has focused on the psychological strategies that reproductive-age women use to maintain their motivation in diet and physical activity. This qualitative study was conducted from September until October 2024 and employed a narrative approach, involving in-depth interviews with six key informants in Bandung City who had experienced or participated in a weight loss program. Additional informants were also included to support the triangulation method. Data were thematically analyzed using NVivo 12 for coding and Microsoft Excel for data tabulation. The study revealed five strategies for overcoming demotivation, burnout, and boredom. (1) Reflecting on Achievements, (2) taking a break for a while, (3) embracing the flexibility of diet and physical activity, (4) remembering the motivation they started to lose weight, and (5) adjusting the intensity of exercise. In conclusion, reflecting on achievement could be a strategy to overcome demotivation, burnout, or boredom during the weight loss journey. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these strategies depends on individual characteristics. Personalized approaches to weight loss programs can be integrated into community-based initiatives and healthcare practices to enhance long-term adherence through group support, educational campaigns, coaching in healthier eating practices, and stress management.

Keywords: Behavioral intervention, motivational strategies, psychological challenges, weight loss

Abstrak

Meningkatnya prevalensi obesitas di kalangan orang dewasa, khususnya Wanita, menegaskan pentingnya strategi manajemen berat badan yang efektif. Meskipun begitu, studi sebelumnya telah banyak mengeksplorasi kepatuhan dalam penurunan berat badan, penelitian yang berfokus pada strategi psikologis yang digunakan Wanita Usia Subur (WUS) untuk mempertahankan motivasi dalam diet dan aktivitas fisik masih terbatas. Studi kualitatif ini dilakukan pada September hingga Oktober 2024, menggunakan metode kualitatif pendekatan naratif dengan melibatkan wawancara mendalam terhadap 6 informan kunci di Kota Bandung yang pernah atau sedang menjalani program penurunan berat badan. Informan tambahan juga dilibatkan untuk mendukung keperluan triangulasi. Data dianalisis secara tematik menggunakan Nvivo 12 untuk pengkodean dan Microsoft Excel untuk tabulasi data. Hasil studi ini menunjukan terdapat lima strategi utama yang WUS lakukan jika mengalami demotivasi, kelelahan, dan kebosanan, diantaranya adalah (1) Merefleksikan pencapaian selama proses menurunkan berat badan, (2) Mengambil waktu jeda atau istirahat sejenak, (3) Menerapkan fleksibilitas dalam diet juga aktivitas fisik, (4) Mengingat

motivasi awal untuk menurunkan berat badan, dan (5) Menyesuaikan intesitas olahraga. Kesimpulan penelitian kualitatif ini adalah merefleksikan pencapaian selama proses menurunkan berat badan dapat menjadi strategi untuk mengatasi demotivasi, kelelahan, atau kebosanan dalam perjalanan penurunan berat badan. Namun efektivitas strategi ini bergantung pada karakteristik individu. Pendekatan yang sangat personal dalam program penurunan berat badan dapat diintegrasikan ke dalam komunitas ataupun praktik layanan Kesehatan untuk meningkatkan kepatuhan jangka Panjang melalui dukungan kelompok, edukasi gizi, pelatihan pola makan sehat, dan manajemen stress.

Kata Kunci: Intervensi perilaku, menurunkan berat badan, strategi motivasi, tantangan

Introduction

Nutritional problems related to overweight and obesity in adults have become a growing national issue. In Indonesia, the prevalence of obesity among individuals over 18 years of age has risen from 21,8% in 2018 to 23,4%, according to the Indonesian Health Survey (SKI). In West Java, obesity is more prevalent among women (35,7%) than men (15,8%) (Kemenkes, 2023). Obesity can be caused by both internal and external factors. Research has shown that socioeconomic status, particularly higher family income, is associated with a greater likelihood of obesity. Individuals from higher-income families have 2,2 times greater risk of developing obesity than those from lower-income families, suggesting that economic status may play a role in shaping lifestyle choices related to weight control (Al Rahmad et al., 2023). Meanwhile, individuals' awareness of obesity affects their decision to take action or delay the weight-loss program. Psychological and metabolic factors can influence the risk of perception, shaping how individuals want to manage their weight (Keweloh et al., 2024).

Weight-management programs have shown that individuals who achieve long-term weight loss consistently adopt healthy dietary habits. They also engage in regular self-monitoring and develop effective psychological coping mechanisms, separating them from those with stable obesity (Phelan et al., 2020). Sustained and significant weight loss involves a combination of consistent monitoring, goal setting, strong motivation, and the ability to preserve, despite facing obstacles and discouraging experiences (Spreckley et al. 2021). Moreover, readiness to adopt healthy behaviors plays a crucial role in weight management, as individuals with higher readiness are more likely to make healthy food choices and engage in physical activity to reduce the risk of obesity (Nabawiyah et al., 2023). In addition, psychological and behavioral factors such as fewer past weight loss attempts, greater self-esteem, higher weight-related quality of life, stronger exercise self-efficacy, and more internal weight locus of control have been identified as key predictors of both short- and long-term weight loss success in women (Rui et al., 2020).

However, despite the well-established benefits of adopting healthy behaviors, maintaining these practices remains challenging, particularly for women of reproductive age, who often balance multiple roles and responsibilities. Research indicates that women with obesity recognize weight loss as an investment in their future health. However, even after achieving weight loss, they often experience pressure to maintain their reduced weight and fear of regaining weight (Myre et al., 2021). This ongoing concern can affect their motivation and approach to weight management, particularly in relation to physical activity, which plays a crucial role in sustaining weight loss. For many individuals, emotional factors significantly influence their decision to engage in physical activity and ability to maintain these habits (Feig et al., 2022). Furthermore, positive reinforcement not only supports adherence to healthy eating patterns but also shapes attitudes toward health, including commitment to physical activity routines (Carrillo et al., 2022). Young adult women tend to develop greater independence, including in food choices. While they start living on their own, they may still have limited skills in meal preparation, which can lead to poor diet quality and contribute to weight gain (Young et al., 2023).

Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the specific strategies used by reproductive-aged women to stay motivated to maintain physical activity and diet during their weight loss

journey. Despite studies exploring adherence to weight loss, there is limited research that concentrates on strategies to address psychological barriers in women of reproductive age. Deeply personal information was chosen as it allows for a more in-depth exploration of individual perspectives, emotions, and coping mechanisms that might not be fully captured through quantitative methods.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative method with a narrative research approach. Narrative research involves the process of gathering and analyzing stories that reflect individual experiences and interpretations, emphasizing personal experiences (Muslihah et al., 2022).

The main informants were women of reproductive age (WUS) in Bandung City who met the inclusion criteria. Informants were selected if they either underwent a weight-loss process or had previously experienced overweight or obesity. The inclusion criteria for this study were women aged 20–37 years with specific body mass index (BMI) classifications based on Kemenkes (2023), including obese (≥27,0), overweight (≥25,0 – <27,0), or normal (≥18,5 – <25,0) with a history of overweight or obesity. Participants were required to have actively engaged in an exercise and/or dietary weight loss program within the past five years. Additionally, they were willing to share their weight loss journey openly with the interviewer and provide signed informed consent.

Based on previous qualitative articles with similar topics, the approach to achieving saturation through the interview method involves between 9 and 17 informants (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The number of informants was determined thoughtfully with the researcher following several guidelines to evaluate whether the sample size was adequate for the study (Mocanasu, 2020). Therefore, six women from Bandung City participated in this study. Data collection was discontinued after interviewing six informants, as data saturation had been reached, so that subsequent informants did not reveal any new information or significant themes. Additionally, time and resource constraints were considered when determining the final number of informants.

Data were collected from September to October through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This approach was deemed essential for gaining a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of individual perceptions of the phenomenon under investigation (Bandur, 2014). Interviews were conducted for 30-45 minutes referred to the interview guidelines, and recorded using the recording feature in the smartphone. These interviews were conducted face-to-face (offline), primarily at the informants' gyms or at their homes. The in-depth interviews were conducted by the researcher without any formal training, but were self-directed and practiced to refine interviewing skills. Additionally, further insights were gained through discussions with the faculty members during the sharing sessions.

The data were transcribed and analyzed using N-Vivo (Version 12) for Windows and Microsoft Excel to tabulate topics related to the interview results. The transcripts were first coded inductively to identify recurring patterns and then grouped into broader thematic categories. Source triangulation was applied to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. Triangulation was conducted by comparing the transcriptions between the main informants and additional informants who could be personal trainers or their close friends.

Ethical approval was obtained from the FIKES University Brawijaya Ethical Committee on September 4th, 2024 (No. 1239/UN10.F17.10.4/TU/2024).

Result and Discussion

Informant characteristic

This in-depth interview was conducted with six women of reproductive age, from 20 to 29 years old, as shown in Table 1.

Tabel 1. Informant characteristic

Name	Age	Weight (kg)	Height (cm)	BMI*
Women 1	27	88	158	35,3
Women 2	29	86	155	35,8
Women 3	24	57	153	24,3
Women 4	20	53	149	23,9
Women 5	28	70	159	27,7
Women 6	23	55	153	23,5

**BMI: Obese (≥27,0 kg/m²), Overweight (>25,0 – 27,0 kg/m²), Normal (18,5 – 25,0 kg/m²)*

The informants in this study were women of reproductive age, specifically between 20 and 29 years. Health decision-making within this age

group is influenced by various factors, including education, employment, and sociocultural dynamics. Research suggests that cultural beliefs and community education levels significantly impact women's decision-making autonomy. In communities with lower poverty rates and higher educational levels, women tend to be more independent in making health-related choices (Aragaw et al. 2023; Kabir et al. 2022). In contrast, women entering the late reproductive stage around age 35 experience physiological changes, including hormonal fluctuations, menstrual cycle variations, and symptoms, such as anxiety and mood shifts, that influence lifestyle and endocrine levels (Nancy Fugate et al., 2021).

Based on in-depth interviews, it was found that strategies among women of reproductive age to address demotivation, burnout, and stress related to physical activity and dieting varied greatly. Each response reflects a different characteristic. From the analysis and tabulation, five main themes emerged: reflecting on achievements, taking a break for a while, embracing flexibility in diet and physical activity, remembering motivation, and adjusting exercise intensity.

Reflecting on Achievements

Reflecting on personal achievement can serve as a powerful motivator during the weight-loss journey. For example, woman 5 said that when she was feeling down, she would reflect on her achievement from the progress, such as how her pants that had not been worn for a long time because it was tight now can fit in again (Women 5):

"*At this point, when I was feeling down, I thought 'Oh no, what a waste, these pants already fit perfectly' something like that*" (Women 5).

Reflecting on achievements, such as fitting into clothes that were once too tight and afraid to start again, can boost self-efficacy and motivate women to continue weight loss efforts. Aligned with research on self-efficacy in diabetes management, social support, and motivation help sustain long-term behavioral changes. Therefore, strategies that strengthen self-efficacy are crucial for maintaining consistent physical activity and healthy eating in women of reproductive age trying to lose weight (Hamidi et al., 2022).

Women 6 also expressed happiness about her progress in weight loss. She felt that after getting used to her weight-loss program, she became happy as she noticed a change in herself. (Women 6).

"*When I look at in the mirror, I am so happy. Because… You know, I look really different from before (before the weight loss program). I just feel happier now when I see myself—it just feels different.*" (Women 6).

Participant 1 also noticed changes in her body. This was reflected in her friend, who commented on the informant (Women 1):

"*Sometimes, what makes me happy is when I met my friends and they say, "oh, Women 1 you look slimmer!" then I'm like 'Oh, Alhamdulillah!' it really makes me happy*' (Women 1).

This phenomenon is consistent with the finding that positive body image is linked to greater self-acceptance (Utari et al., 2024). Similarly, research has shown a strong relationship between body image and self-acceptance, especially among women (Razani, 2024).

The achievements were also experienced by Women 3 and brought her a sense of enjoyment towards exercising (Women 3):

"*Now, I actually enjoy to working out. Even though I am not a workout freak or anything, I do feel happy because I have found a sense of peace while exercising*' (Women 3).

The feelings expressed by Women 3 align with research indicating that exercise enhances mood by regulating neurochemicals, such as dopamine, serotonin, and norepinephrine, leading to positive emotional and behavioral changes. It also supports neurogenesis, neuroplasticity, and cognitive function, which play crucial roles in mental health and overall well-being (Parlakyıldız, 2024).

Although some participants used this strategy to boost motivation, others did not mention adopting the same approach. This may be because some individuals avoid self-monitoring due to weight-related information avoidance (WIA), leading to poor adherence and reduced engagement in weight-loss programs (Schumacher et al., 2021).

Take a break for a while

Repetitive routines can significantly impair a person's ability to stay alert and focus, thereby reducing vigilance and task performance. This is because monotonous and unstimulating activities lead to mental fatigue, making it harder to sustain attention or perform effectively over time (Cummings et al., 2016).

Aligned with the explanation above, a strategy was adopted by several informants in this study to overcome demotivation in physical activity and dieting. The first strategy is *to take a break for some time*. For instance, woman 1 shared her opinion that she likes to ask her personal trainer to spare some time before extending the program again.

"So, if I feel lazy, I will take a break, maybe for a day or two. But later on, I will definitely come back again…" (Women 3)

A break from a strict diet or exercise routine can help reduce stress, improve motivation, and preserve lean mass. Previous research has shown that brief dietary breaks can enhance both physical performance and mental well-being (Peos et al., 2021). Moreover, frequent short breaks may reduce cortical activation in the prefrontal cortex during cognitive tasks, potentially alleviating mental fatigue (Heiland et al., 2021).

For some women, overcoming stress or boredom during physical activity requires personalized strategies. For example, woman 4 highlighted the importance of enjoying every aspect of her activities, including physical activity. When she feels bored or stressed, she chooses to skip exercise because she believes that it should be an enjoyable experience. (Women 4).

"*I think when it comes to exercising, it is better to skip it for a while… we should exercise that enjoyable. Even though the process seems slow, but the result will show"* (Women 4)

This perspective aligns with that of a study conducted in 2016. This study found that focusing on fun, sociability, and achievable short-term benefits rather than long-term health outcomes encourages greater engagement and sustains physical activity over time. Additionally, positive experiences during such interventions enhance individuals' perceptions of their capabilities, translating into increased activity in other areas of their lives (Devereux-Fitzgerald et al., 2016).

Another way to take rest from feeling stress and getting bored to go to the gym, Women 1 decided to sleep instead (Women 1).

"*When I am really stressed or so bored, I just sleep.. it is like, 'That is it, this is not going to work anyway… better to just sleep'* something like that." (Women 1)

Therefore, sleep can serve as an immediate coping mechanism for stress and boredom, as expressed by women 1, whose choose to rest rather than engage in physical activity when feeling demotivated. However, research shows that insufficient or irregular sleep may increase the appeal of high-calorie intake, hindering weight loss efforts (Rihm et al., 2019). Sleep also plays a significant role in weight loss. Based on previous research, high-quality sleep is associated with effective fat loss (Kline et al., 2021), which is part of their weight loss journey.

The relationship between sleep quality and weight loss success is complex, as inadequate sleep can interfere with weight loss, while weight loss may enhance sleep quality. Studies have indicated that insufficient sleep is associated with metabolic imbalance, potentially increasing obesity risk and making weight loss more challenging (Gangitano et al., 2023; Knowlden et al., 2023). In contrast, there are significant improvements in sleep quality and reduction in perceived stress associated with weight loss (Carter et al., 2024).

Embracing the flexibility of diet and physical activity

Weight loss journeys often require individuals to adopt a balance between discipline and adaptability, especially when it comes to dietary and physical activity habits. In this study, Women 2 claimed that she would eat everything she wanted because of burnout or stress (Women 2):

"*I usually just try to hold myself back… But when I am stressed, I always end up eating, and I just cannot stop myself*" (Women 2)

A flexible approach to eating habits may provide better weight loss program results (Berg et al. 2018). Colin et al. indicated that a flexible dieting approach enhances weight loss success by allowing individuals to adjust food intake without strict restrictions, reducing cravings, and disinhibition, which promotes long-term weight maintenance compared with grid dieting strategies. However, this concept not only helps individuals lose weight but may also aid in the preservation of muscle mass after the weight loss phase (Conlin et al., 2021).

Other findings suggest that a significant portion of the surveyed individuals struggled with stress-related overeating. Factors such as BMI, personality traits, and eating motivations are associated with this behavior (Kaiser et al., 2022). This aligns with the positive relationship

between arousal and willingness to consume unhealthy foods, underscoring the complexity of women's dietary motivations (Hansen, 2024).

In addition, Women 3 mentioned that she avoided forcing herself to go to the gym because it would only make her feel lazy.

"*I don't force myself to go to the gym because if I do, I'll just get lazier"* (Women 3)

Based on Women 3, who emphasized that exercise should be enjoyable and suggested taking breaks when motivation wanes, it aligns with research that highlights the importance of enjoyment in fostering healthy behaviors such as fruit consumption. Studies show that emphasizing enjoyment can lead to positive attitudes, greater intentions to engage in healthy behaviors, and increased selection of healthier options, such as fruits (Appleton & Adams, 2023).

Moreover, another strategy was demonstrated by Women 6, who continued to enjoy her favorite snack while controlling portion sizes (Women 6):

"*For example, I still eat seblak, but I decreased the portion size"* (Women 6)

For instance, a study revealed that controlled portioned foods contribute to initial weight loss; however, weight is often regained over time, suggesting that maintaining long-term adherence can be challenging (Rolls et al., 2017). "Cheat day" might be crucial thing in weight loss journey, but programs that incorporate flexibility have shown higher participant retention and success rates in weight loss intervention.

Remember the motivation they started to lose weight

In addition, some informants will recall their first reason or goal to start losing weight, whether they feel demotivated by physical activity or diet.

Aligned with findings from the literature, one of the key motivations for weight loss is the desire not to return to a previous state or moment, which is driven by strong internal determination (Binsaeed et al., 2023). Recalling the initial motivation for weight loss itself may serve as a way to reconnect with their personal reasons for starting the journey, such as clothes that become smaller.

Correspondingly, Women 5 tried to maintain consistency in achieving goals with an effort to always get back on the right path after moments of deviation.

"*When we feel like turning off, I remind myself 'oh right, my goal is this way,' so I straighten up again. If I turn off the track, I realign myself again. That is just how it is…*" (Women 5)

Women 5 approach for consistency in the weight loss journey reflects a strong sense of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy influences choices, effort, persistence, and achievement, which impacts personal actions and interactions with social and environmental factors (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2021).

Similar to Women 4, who considered having a healthy lifestyle and achieving an ideal body weight as a turning point for engaging in exercise (Women 4),

"*Maybe it is because I have that goals.. like, I want to live a healthier life and really want to reach my ideal body weight."* (Women 4)

This aligns with research suggesting that self-efficacy, combined with goal setting and regular exercise, plays an important role in sustaining motivation for weight management (Dicker et al., 2021).

On the other hand, Women 2 saw the fluctuating phases of her weight gain and loss as motivation to get back on track with her program (Women 2):

"*Yeah, remember the body weight, whether it goes up or down*" (Women 2)

"*if my weight goes up, then so be it. If it goes down, that is fine, too.. When it goes up (the body weight), I get motivated to exercise again—I Just do it the way I liked"* (Women 2)

Changes in weight can act as triggers that influence an individual's psychological state and weight-management behaviors. Meanwhile, those who maintain an optimistic mindset about their weight loss journey may remain motivated, even when facing a minor weight increase (Hagerman et al., 2024).

Adjust the intensity of exercise

Adjusting exercise intensity has become a common strategy since the COVID-19 pandemic, as many have shifted to home workouts due to lockdown restrictions. Studies have highlighted that 37% of the participants reported reduced intensity, especially among those with chronic conditions, including obesity (Rogers et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Women 6 got injury but still wanted to exercise, so she chose to exercise at home. To prevent her from attending the gym,

she adjusted the intensity and duration of her workout.

"*At that time, I was dealing with some issues, so I decided to work out at home. But, yeah, I felt lazy because I always exercised alone and was kind of boring. So, I ended up doing it only for 15 minutes*" (Women 6)

In addition, physical activity duration guidelines recommend 150-300 minutes of moderate aerobic exercise weekly, but shorter sessions have been shown to be effective (Yang, 2019). Women 6 adjusted her routine to 15 minutes of home workouts, which demonstrated flexibility in maintaining activity despite challenges, such as injury and boredom. Aligned with this, adjusting the physical activity that women 6 did in weight loss programs can enhance energy expenditure, promote metabolic benefits, and support lean body mass increase (Isaacs, 2019).

This study had several limitations. Informants were limited to women of reproductive age in Bandung, which may not fully represent the experiences of reproductive-aged women in other regions with different social conditions and access, making the findings less generalizable. Additionally, not all weight strategies were comprehensively explored, because the researcher's limited experience in conducting in-depth interviews may have influenced the depth and quality of the data collected. Aligned with this, the data potentially affected the exploration of certain themes and the ability to probe participants' experiences further. Furthermore, the qualitative approach used in this study provides exploratory and descriptive insights without quantifying the data; therefore, future research with a larger sample size and quantitative approach could complement these findings and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence successful weight loss among women of reproductive age.

Conclusion

This study explored the strategies employed by women of reproductive age to address demotivation, burnout, and boredom during their weight loss journeys. The findings demonstrate that the women relied on various self-developed approaches to maintain their efforts, such as Reflecting on Achievements, taking a break for a while, bracing the flexibility of diet and physical activity, remembering the motivation they started to lose weight, and adjusting the intensity of exercise. These strategies highlight the need for adaptive and individualized methods to sustain weight loss.

The effectiveness of these strategies depends on individual characteristics and conditions such as self-awareness and the level of support available. Nevertheless, these in-depth interviews revealed that reflecting on achievements during the weight loss process can be applied across various nutritional interventions, especially weight loss programs.

These findings have implications for public health programmes. The identified strategies can be integrated into community-based initiatives that emphasize personalized approaches, such as group support, to maintain long-term motivation in weight-loss programs. In addition, educational campaigns focusing on flexible yet controlled eating habits could be an alternative. Healthcare practitioners can use these insights to help patients develop strategies that align better with their psychological and social conditions. Journaling can be incorporated into diet programs to help patients or clients regularly reflect on their achievements and to enhance their motivation. Additionally, providing coaching services for healthier eating habits without rigid restrictions, such as practicing mindful eating while maintaining flexibility and reducing stress.

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