

## Real Voices: Stephan Dombrowski

### *Meet Stephan, a health psychologist at the University of Stirling*

#### **What do you do?**

I develop and test interventions that try and help people to change their behaviour. This can be anything that people do that relates to their health: physical activity, healthy eating, using sunscreen, taking their medication.

#### **How do you change behaviour?**

The first thing is that people need to want to change in the first place. Usually, you have a reason why you want to lose weight: for yourself, for health reasons, to spend time with your family. Once they become motivated then you need to help them look at what it is they're doing, what they can improve and how they might do that.

#### **How do you deal with constantly changing health advice?**

The media don't help, spreading confusing messages and overblowing findings, but there are certain things that aren't going to change. Anything in moderation is okay and the rest is about sensible eating. We've known the basics of healthy eating for hundreds of years – eating vegetables and plant-based foods, eating meat in moderation, avoiding too much sugar and fat in your diet.

Given the environment we live in, it's always difficult. We're exposed to a lot of high-fat, high-calorie foods that are difficult to resist in the moment, despite the best of intentions. There's always a tasty cream cake that calls your name.

#### **What is the focus of your work?**

One of the things we're really trying to address within my research and health psychology in general is health inequality. People who live in deprived communities are often disproportionately affected by disease that is often related to their behaviour. So we try and target those people. They might need more intensive interventions and a bit more support because the environments they live in are not very supportive for them changing their behaviour.

## ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

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## **What are the interventions like?**

There are different modes of delivery. It can be face to face, or you could have a leaflet that a nurse gives to the patient. There are also remote means: e-health uses the internet, m-health involves apps or text messages on mobile phones.

## **How do you use text messages?**

You can send messages that have certain behaviour-change techniques embedded in them. For example, one technique that's very successful in terms of changing a lot of behaviours is self-monitoring. You can get people to monitor their behaviour – for example, how many calories they've eaten – and then get them to text back. Engaging people in a conversation seems to work a bit better than just telling people what to do.

## **What was your favourite subject at school?**

I went to school in Germany in the 90s before coming over to the UK. My favourite subjects were those that included the scientific study of humans and their behaviour, which were pedagogy and sociology at the time.

## **How did you get into your current role?**

I knew from a young age that I wanted to become a psychologist. When I studied psychology at university I took health psychology as a module and loved it. I decided to do an MSc in health psychology, which led me on to do a PhD in the same area. Since then I've had lots of different exciting jobs in the area of health behaviour. I think what has helped me along the way has been working hard, having people that believe in you and support you, and a bit of luck.

## **What would you like to change yourself?**

The funny thing about behaviour change is that knowing a lot about it doesn't mean that it is easy to do it. I am very bad for wanting something sweet like biscuits after dinner, so try to eat fruit and natural yoghurt instead. We have a two-year-old daughter who already expects sugary sweets after dinner. I give in to her demands more often than I should.

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