

# Deborah Tate, PhD — Health Psychologist

## NO COUCHES OR POTATOES

In studying psychology at Virginia Tech, Deborah Tate, PhD, quickly realized that rather than working with patients in a stereotypical patient-on-the-couch scenario, she preferred to help patients get off the couch.

Tate's passion is helping others to live a healthier lifestyle, which is why she focused her training toward a career as a health psychologist. She wanted to dig deeper into the how and why of lifestyle choices, such as what motivates people to begin exercising or change their diet or on the flip side, do nothing at all.

"The leading causes of death are actually preventable," Tate says. "Cardiovascular disease, diabetes and other types of chronic illness can be prevented or treated by making health and lifestyle changes."

## CONFRONTING UNHEALTHY TRENDS, DIGITALLY

On average, young adults in the U.S. are gaining 30 pounds between the ages of 18 and 35. Not surprisingly, they are also starting to have cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure and cholesterol problems earlier than prior generations.

"Young adults don't join weight loss programs until they are overweight," says Tate. "And then they struggle to get it off."

Tate wants to change that trend and is using her research to figure out how to do so.

Tate and her team are taking what they know about human behavior, for example the types of things that motivate someone to make a healthy choice compared to the situations that result in unhealthy choices, and combining that knowledge with technology. They are using their research findings to develop a Web and mobile program that provides both information and rewards to young adults to stay updated on their weight loss goals.

This program lets people measure important health markers like blood pressure, body fat percentage, cholesterol, glucose and insulin levels, and metabolic rate. It also provides a detailed analysis of individuals' dietary intake and physical activity to keep their activity right in front of them at all times. That way, they can see the good results of healthy choices and connect undesirable results to unhealthy choices and make a different choice next time.

"We're using technology because we know young adults are mobile and have busy lives," says Tate. "This allows us to deliver a longer term program that meets their needs and schedules, which would be much harder to do face-to-face."

## ONE SUCCESS AT A TIME

What Tate values most about her job is being able to help people on an individual level while creating new, evidence-based strategies that support healthy choices and have the potential to help lots of people.

"It makes you feel good to see the results when an individual starts to feel better after losing weight, and they are able to do things differently than before," Tate says. "Since the science that we do has results that you measure, it is easy to tell whether our strategy worked and made a difference in someone's life."



"It feels really good when a program you've worked on results in another person feeling better about themselves."

### HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY

Health psychologists use psychological science to understand biological, social and psychological factors that influence health and illness. They use their research to promote health, prevent illness and improve health care systems.

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