

Chocolate craving

Professor Carey Morewedge explains his theory to Dr Chris van Tulleken

Chris: So ok, we've got people in a room with the bowls of chocolate, asking them to think about chocolate. This seems like a bizarre way of trying to get them to eat less chocolate.

Carey: It does seem bizarre, but it's really based on some good science about how cravings are formed.

Chris: So we all have cravings, or most of us do. What's going on in the booths at the moment with the chocolate in front of our participants?

Carey: Right, so we have 30 pieces of chocolate in each of the booths. And the idea is that those 30 chocolates are basically stimulating a craving. So cravings are often formed through a memory that we have. We may have a memory about a positive time that we ate chocolate, we may think about the taste of a chocolate that we once had. And so all these different kinds of cues can lead us to think about how positive it would be to have it and to notice how unpleasant it is that we aren't eating chocolate right now.

Chris: OK, so to have a craving you've got to have had a positive experience? That's what a craving is – it's about memory, it's not a kind of physical addiction to the substance?

Carey: Right, so we don't think that any of these people are necessarily addicted to chocolate. But the basic idea is that they've had positive experiences with chocolate in the past.

Chris: Since I was a kid what we get told is just avoid it: avoid it physically, avoid thinking about it, avoid it mentally. Why can't we just do that?

Carey: Right, that intuitively seems to make sense, but it's problematic because of memory as well. So when we try to avoid thinking about something - like right now try not to think of a white bear, immediately, right, you think about a white bear? And so what we find is that when people try to suppress thoughts of something it tends to actually activate those thoughts and they're more likely to have them.

Chris: And that's certainly true, in my own experience – with foods, with anything pleasurable – trying to avoid it makes it more desirable. So OK, we're asking them to think about eating the chocolate as a way of reducing their chocolate intake, as a way of decreasing temptation

Carey: No, it does seem crazy right?

Chris: If it's effective it will be a more enjoyable way of resisting a craving that the attempt at, kind of, blanking our minds?

Carey: yeah, that's the hope.