GUEST EDITORIAL

Obesity Care: Inspiration from the Bhagavad Gita

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ABSTRACT

Obesity has emerged as a major health challenge. While effective drugs are now available, intensive behavioral therapy (IBT) remains the keystone of obesity management. IBT is required to manage weight and maintain health. However, motivational therapeutics is a challenging field of medicine. In this editorial, we take inspiration from the Bhagavad Gita to help understand the need to fight obesity, and the means of doing so. Arjuna can be viewed as a metaphor for the person living with obesity, who is confused about whether to attempt weight loss or not. Lord Krishna offers a balanced viewpoint, including an attitude of equanimity, moderation in diet and exercise; focus on spiritual (and psychosocial) health, and use of evidence-based person-centered medicine.

Keywords: Motivational therapeutics, obesity, overweight, person-centered medicine, psychosocial, semaglutide, tirzepatide

WEIGHTY CHALLENGE

What happens when the battlefield is not Kurukshetra, but the body itself? And the enemy is not a rival army, but one's own habits, hormones, and hesitations? Obesity is the modern Kurukshetra – a struggle between desire and discipline, action, and inaction.

Obesity has emerged as a major challenge to health at both individual and public levels. The rapid increase in the prevalence of obesity has been accompanied by efforts at its prevention and management. Obesity is more and more thought of as a disease modulated by neurotransmitters than a mere energy in and out phenomenon. This has resulted in development of newer drugs, such as semaglutide and tirzepatide, which complement earlier options like orlistat and liraglutide. The keystone of obesity management, however, remains intensive behavioral therapy (IBT)[1]. It is required to initiate, and adhere to, modification in lifestyle, including diet and exercise. It is here that most persons living with obesity, and their health care professionals, struggle.

Motivational therapeutics is a complex, and challenging field of medicine[2,3]. It requires mastery of both art and science and needs multidisciplinary knowledge and training. One way of motivation is by using respected religious scriptures. This is especially true in Asia, where both religiosity and spirituality play an important role in the lives of most people[4].

ARJUNA AS A METAPHOR

In this editorial, we use quotes from the Bhagavad Gita to help understand the need to fight obesity, and the means of doing so. The Bhagavad Gita is written as a song, describing the conversation between Lord Krishna and his reluctant warrior, Arjuna[5]. Its teachings guide and inspire people coping with disease, and their health care professionals as well[6,7].

Arjuna can be viewed as a metaphor for the person living with obesity. He is confused about whether to attempt weight loss or not, as it involves giving up many pleasurable but sinful things (comparable to fighting relatives who have been sinful). Just as Arjuna needed Krishna to reframe the battle as *Dharma*, the individual today needs wisdom to reframe lifestyle change as a sacred duty.

"Arjuna said: Krishna, as I see these kinsmen arrayed for battle, my limbs give way, and my mouth is getting parched; nay, a shiver runs through my body and hair stands on end.

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The bow, Gandiva, slips from my hand and my skin too burns all over; my mind is whirling, as it were, and I can no longer hold myself steady."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 1:28-30.

HOLISTIC FRAMEWORK

Lord Krishna, however, clearly states the link between food and being. He emphasizes that disease, along with birth, old age and death is inevitable, but we should address it. While propounding the philosophy of life, Lord Krishna describes various facets of existence, all of which are relevant to weight homeostasis. He reminds us of the need to understand our body (*Kshetra*), its various organs, its multifaceted physiology, as well as our style of thinking and behavior.

"*All beings are evolved from food*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 3:14.

"*Dispassion towards the objects of enjoyment of this world and the next, and also absence of egotism, pondering again and again on the pain and evils inherent in birth, death, old age, and disease*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 13:8.

"*Sri Bhagavan said: This body, Arjuna is termed as the Field (Kshetra) and he who knows it, is called the knower of the Field (Kshetragya) by the sages discerning the truth about both*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 13:1.

The Gita describes the "knower of senses" and the fact that "knowership" or wisdom is in the mind. Whenever the knower understands distinction between senses and objects (such as food and pleasure) and handles them by intellect, the battle against the enemy (obesity, in this context) is won.

"*The five elements, the ego, the intellect, the unmanifest (primordial matter), the 10 organs of perception and action, the mind, and the five objects of sense (sound, touch, color, taste, and smell)*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 13:5.

"*The nature of this tree of creation does not on mature thought turn out what it is represented to be; for it has neither beginning nor end, nor even stability. Therefore, cutting down this Pipala tree, which is most firmly rooted, with the formidable axe of dispassion*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 15:3.

MULTIFACETED VIEW OF OBESITY

Lord Krishna provides a useful concept, the Triguna model, with which we can sapiotype, psychetype, and phenotype ourselves. This classification, into *saatvik* (balanced, equipoised), *raajsik* (hyperactive), and *taamsik* (slow, slothful) states, helps plan approach to therapy.

"*Prakriti is said to be responsible for bringing forth the evolutes and the instruments; while the individual soul is declared to be responsible for the experience of joys and sorrows*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 13:20.

"*Sattva draws one to joy and Rajas to action; while Tamas, clouding wisdom, impels one to error, sleep and sloth Arjuna*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 14:9.

ATTITUDE, APTITUDE, AND ACTION

The Gita is the pinnacle of motivational therapeutics, and Lord Krishna, the epitome of motivation. He demonstrates, through his words and actions, the art and science of motivational therapeutics. Even in a situation as stressful as the battlefield, he highlights challenges and obstacles that we all encounter in life, the means of overcoming them, and the need to keep on working continuously.

"*Treating alike victory and defeat, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, get ready for the battle; fighting thus you will not incur sin*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 2:38.

"*The sacrifice which is offered, as ordained by scriptural injunctions, by men who expect no return and who believe that such sacrifices must be performed, is Saatvika in character*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 17:11.

"*Arjuna, in this Yoga (of disinterested action) the intellect is determinate and directed singly towards one ideal; whereas the intellect of the undecided (ignorant men moved by desires) wanders in all directions, after innumerable aims*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 2:41.

"*All living creatures follow their tendencies; even the wise man acts according to the tendencies of his own nature. Of what use is any external restraint*?"

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 3:33.

"*Sri Bhagavan said: The mind is restless no doubt, and difficult to curb, Arjuna; but it can be brought under control by repeated practice (of meditation) and by the exercise of dispassion, O son of Kunti*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 6:35.

"*O son of Kunti, the contacts between the senses and their objects, which give rise to the feelings of heat and cold, pleasure and pain, etc., are transitory and fleeting; therefore, Arjuna, endure them*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 2:14.

"*One who is able to withdraw the senses from their objects, just as a tortoise withdraws its limbs into its shell, is established in divine wisdom*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 2:58.

"*Sri Bhagavan said: Arjuna, when one thoroughly casts off all cravings of the mind, and is satisfied in the Self through the joy of the Self, he is then called stable of mind*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 2:55.

It is important for persons living with obesity to manage the hedonistic craving for food, either by self-motivation, or medically with drugs such as semaglutide or tirzepatide.

DIET AND EXERCISE: MINDFUL MODERATION

In his sermon, he reveals the secrets of a healthy diet, and the relevance of physical activity. While encouraging performance of duty, without "fear of physical strain", he cautions against extreme measures, and promotes moderation. Lord Krishna does not forget to advice pragmatism and practicality in one's approach, keeping one's capability, capacity, and consequences in mind.

Diet

"*Whosoever offers Me with love a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or even water, I appear in person before that selfless devotee of sinless mind, and delightfully partake of that article offered by him with love*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 9:26.

"*Foods which promote longevity, intelligence, vigor, health, happiness and cheerfulness, and which are juicy, succulent, substantial and naturally agreeable, are liked by men of Saatvika nature*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 17:8.

Physical Activity

"*Surely, none can ever remain inactive even for a moment; for, everyone is helplessly driven to action by modes of Prakriti*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 3:5.

"*Therefore, do you perform your allotted duty; for action is superior to inaction. Desisting from action, you cannot even maintain your body*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 3:8.

"*Should anyone give up his duties for fear of physical strain, thinking that all actions are verily painful, practicing such Rajasika form of renunciation, he does not reap the fruit of renunciation*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 18:8.

MODERATION

"*Arjuna, this Yoga is neither for him who overeats, nor for him who observes complete fast; it is neither for him who is given to too much sleep, nor even for him who is ceaselessly awake*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 6:16.

"*Yoga, which rids one of woe, is accomplished only by him who is regulated in diet and recreation, regulated in performing actions, and regulated in sleep and wakefulness*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 6:17.

"*That action which is undertaken through sheer ignorance, without regard to consequences or loss to oneself, injury to others and one's own resourcefulness, is declared as Tamasika*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 18:25.

"*Free from attachment, unegoistic, endowed with firmness and zeal and unswayed by success and failure, such a doer is said to be Sattvika*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 18:26.

SPIRITUAL HEALTH

The Bhagavad Gita calls for a focus on spiritual health, promoting "sacrifice, charity, and penance". All these aspects find resonance in modern evidence-based obesity care. Spiritual practices such as gratitude, self-reflection, prayer, and community service help reduce emotional eating, improve compliance, and foster a deeper connection to one's body as a vessel of divine duty.

The same themes – multifaceted approach, motivational therapeutics, diet, physical activity, and stress management – are repeated in contemporary guidelines, and can be included under the umbrella of psychosocial care.

"*Foster the Gods through this sacrifice, and let the Gods be gracious to you. Thus, each fostering the other selflessly, you will attain the highest good*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 3:11.

"*The virtuous who partake of what is left over after sacrifice, are absolved of all sins. Those sinful ones who cook for the sake of nourishing their bodies alone, partake of sin only*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 3:13.

"*Acts of sacrifice, charity and penance are not worth giving up; they must be performed. For sacrifice, charity and penance, all these are purifiers to the wise men*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 18:5.

EVIDENCE-BASED THERAPY

There may be detractors, however, who feel that this opinion piece is not evidence-based. Arjuna, too, faced the same dilemma. Lord Krishna respected his need for evidence, and provided it to him. The Bhagavad Gita, therefore, is perhaps the oldest literature in the world which acknowledges and appreciates evidence-based beliefs. At the same time, it underscores the necessity to keep seeking knowledge and wisdom.

"*Lord, You are precisely what You declare Yourself to be. But I long to see Your divine form possessed of wisdom, glory, energy, strength, valor and effulgence, O Purushottam, the Supreme Being*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 11:3.

"*But surely you cannot see Me with these human eyes of yours; therefore, I vouchsafe to you the divine eye. With this you behold My divine power of Yoga*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 11:8.

NEED FOR CONTINUING MEDICAL EDUCATION

"*As fire is covered by smoke, mirror by dust, and embryo by the amnion, so is knowledge covered by desire*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 3:38.

"*And, Arjuna, Knowledge stands covered by this eternal enemy of the wise known as desire, which is insatiable like fire*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 3:39.

"*In this world, there is no purifier as great as Knowledge; he who has attained purity of heart through prolonged practice of Karma yoga, automatically sees the light of Truth in the self in course of time*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 4:38.

"*In order to bestow My compassion on them, I, dwelling in their hearts, dispel their darkness born of ignorance by the illuminating lamp of knowledge*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 10:11.

LEADERSHIP BY EXAMPLE

Our readers are leaders in their chosen field, and the Bhagavad Gita extols us to set highest standards of perfection for ourselves as well as for others. This is what we should practice, and preach, as obesity care professionals. We must encourage persons living with obesity to optimize their weight, using rational means and methods, with responsible style and strategy.

"*That action which is ordained by the scriptures and is not accompanied by the sense of doership, and has been done without any attachment or aversion by one who seeks no return, is called Sattvika*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 18:23.

"*For whatever a great man does, that very thing other men also do; whatever standard he sets up, the generality of men follow the same*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 3:21.

"*A wise man established in the Self should not unsettle the mind of the ignorant attached to action, but should get them to perform all their duties, duly performing his own duties*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 3:26.

PERSON-CENTERED CARE

Bhagavad Gita is a classic example of how an obesity consultation is crafted. In today's world of misinformation and mischief, patients may get carried away by false claims, deflect from the right path and take wrong decisions. This is because of incomplete or incorrect knowledge. It is the responsibility of the doctor to share information and assist in making the right decision. Simultaneously, we should be humble enough to accept that the final choice lies with the individual in front of us. Lord Krishna, too, propounded person-centricity, leaving the final choice with Arjuna: "now do as you like".

"*One's own duty, though devoid of merit, is preferable to the duty of another well performed. Even death in the performance of one's own duty brings blessedness; another's duty is fraught with fear*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 3:35.

"*The wise look with equanimity on all whether it be a Brahmana endowed with learning and culture, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a pariah, too*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 5:18.

"*Thus, has this wisdom, more profound than all profundities, been imparted to you by Me; deeply pondering over it, now do as you like*."

—Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 18:63.

INSPIRATION TO ACTION

The Gita does not promise that the battle will be easy—but it promises clarity, purpose, and strength for those willing to fight. As obesity care professionals, we are not merely healers of the body, but also guides of the spirit. Let the teachings of Lord Krishna inspire a new era of care—one that balances science with soul, evidence with empathy, and choice with counsel.

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