- Obesity

How depression piles on the pounds if you're overweight

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FEELING down in the dumps could lead obese people to put on almost a pound a month – while those who are slimmer stay the same size.

Researchers tracked the emotions of more than 2,000 people for up to nine months.

Each month, they were asked about depressive symptoms, like taking little pleasure in daily activities or feeling bad about themselves. More than 90% of those in the study did not have clinical depression.

But when overweight or obese people felt more depressed generally, they gained weight a month later. There was no difference for those who were a healthy weight to begin with.

Researchers suspect people who are overweight and obese may be more prone to comfort-eating high-calorie, fatty and sugary foods when they struggle emotionally.

The study authors gave people a score out of 24 for depressive symptoms, based on their answers. A score just five points higher than their 'usual' average level of depressive thoughts, for obese people, was linked to an average weight gain of 0.8 pounds (0.36kg).

For the overweight, the same increase in negative feelings was linked to weight gain of 0.6lbs (0.26kg).

This kind of weight gain could mount up over months or years, the researchers warn. They suggest slimming classes, and weight loss apps, might want to record how people are feeling as often as their food intake and exercise levels.

Then those who are struggling could be given tips which might help to lift their mood, like online cognitive therapy, mindfulness, listening to music or gardening, before they eat unhealthily.

Dr Julia Mueller, from the University of Cambridge, said: 'These findings suggest that people who are living with overweight or obesity are more vulnerable to weight gain in response to feeling more depressed.

'We know from previous evidence that people who feel depressed can overeat, or eat higher calorie foods with more fat or sugar, or be less likely to go for a walk or take exercise.

'Weight gain may be seen only in people with a higher BMI because these are people with a genetic predisposition to comfort-eating or who learned to use food as comfort as children.

'Or it may be the case that they gain weight more easily than people with a lower BMI.'

The study, published in PLOS One, found depressive symptoms were linked to self-reported weight gain a month later, but weight gain was not linked to depressive symptoms a month later.