

WEIGHT MANAGEMENT & EATING BEHAVIOUR

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ARE DIETS THE ANSWER? - IF NOT, THEN WHAT?

Are Diets the Answer?

Worldwide statistics show that weight reducing diets and restrictive eating plans do not achieve what people go on them for - that is to lose weight and maintain the weight lost. A recent summary article in the medical journal *Annals of Internal Medicine* (Oct.93) stated: *"In controlled settings participants who remain in weight loss programs usually lose 10% of their weight. However, 1/3 to 2/3 of the weight is regained within one year, and almost all is regained within 5 years"*.

In fact, many people not only regain the weight they lose, but they actually end up heavier than before they started the diet.

For many years, the word diet has been used to mean "a way of eating". The meaning of the word has changed so much now that for most people it actually means the exact opposite. A way of **not** eating!

The word diet for most people also implies:

- D** for *deprivation* - just thinking about going on a diet let alone attempting one can make us feel deprived,
- I** for *impressive* - because diets can create an impressive weight loss in the short term,
- E** for *energy* sapping - because they drain us of our emotional and physical energy; and
- T** for *temporary*, which is what most people get if they go on a diet - **a temporary change**.

When people decide to diet, they are faced with a myriad of choices. Fad diets, drink mixes, meal replacements, calorie counting - the list goes on and on. It doesn't seem to matter which one you try, the long term results are all similar. Most people put the weight back on again. If there were no negative effects associated with regaining weight after going on a diet, if you had the money to spend, and it was simply a matter of bad luck, then you might think it would be worth it to try again. Maybe it will work for you? However, there **are** risks for people who diet.

(i) Physical

There are short-term physical side effects, such as impaired concentration, with subsequent negative effects on work or study.

Studies from recent world research show that there may also be long-term physical side effects if we have swings in our weight. Some people call this yo-yo dieting. At the time of printing, there is no definite answer on this, but it is a possibility.

(ii) Emotional

Dieting has been seen to be associated with an increased chance of depression, and has been shown to be a risk factor for eating problems and for eating disorders. There are also significant emotional and psychological risks that come from regaining weight lost on a diet. Our self esteem drops and this impacts in a negative way in many areas of our lives.

If not dieting, then what?

It **is** healthy for us to maintain a comfortable weight, but it is how we go about achieving this that is the key. So if not dieting, then what?

1. Individual, sustainable behavioural goals:

As with many areas of life, having goals is essential. But it is important to have the right goals to help you achieve what you really want. If you are over the most healthy, comfortable weight you can be, it may be that one of your goals is to lose weight. However, even when this is your aim, it is important to focus on individual and sustainable behavioural goals, and allow the change in weight to come as a result of the behaviour change. The following points include some of the important behavioural changes many people need to focus and work on so they can achieve and maintain a healthy, comfortable weight.

2. A positive attitude towards food:

Despite what many of us think about food, despite how many of us talk about food, and even despite what many of us have been taught about food, there is no such thing as good food or bad food. We **do** need to know which foods are healthy for us to eat most of, but putting a moral tag on food, such as calling it "junk food", or "good food" is of no benefit in developing a healthy eating pattern. So chocolate is not bad and apples are not good. Cake is not bad and capsicums are not good. We need to look at all food as being 'morally neutral'. Going to the local fish and chip shop every night for a month would be a bad use of fish and chips, but that does not mean that having an occasional meal of fish and chips is bad for you, or that chips are bad. For most people, 10 chocolate bars a day would not be a healthy way of eating, but it still doesn't make having a chocolate bar bad, or make the chocolate bad itself. It also wouldn't make the person who ate the chocolate bad.

If we do think of certain types of food as 'bad', or 'junk' or 'rubbish' and then we eat that food: How do we feel? Usually we feel bad about ourselves and guilty about what we have eaten, and this makes even harder the process of looking after ourselves and developing a healthy eating pattern. Often this guilty feeling can make us eat **more** of that sort of food, even when we no longer feel like it. It is very important that we know which foods are most healthy for us to eat, but calling a certain food 'good' or 'bad' is of no benefit to our nutritional understanding or education. We need to be looking at these foods and calling them what they are. For example, we can talk about food being **healthy, high fat or high sugar**, or particularly for children, we could describe food as **healthy food, party food or sometimes food**. So apples would be a healthy food, and chocolate would be a high fat or a sometimes food.

We do need to be educated as to which foods are high or low in sugar and fat, and we certainly want to have a balance in the amounts of the different types of food that we eat, but there is no benefit in placing a moral tag on food - it just increases the chances of creating problems with our eating behaviour.

3. Non-hungry eating

We can all eat food when we are not really feeling physically hungry. This sort of eating can be called **non-hungry eating**. Non-hungry eating can include things like overeating, grazing, picking, nibbling and bingeing. Non-hungry eating can occur at any time, such as at the times we eat our main meals, in between the times we eat our main meals and even overnight. It is quite normal to do some non-hungry eating, but when we do too much it can tip our eating out of balance.

If we can decrease the amount of eating we do when we are really not physically hungry for it, most of us can still enjoy a wide range of foods of different tastes, textures, fat and sugar content and still reach and maintain a healthy, comfortable weight.

(a) Is it hungry eating or not?

Over time, many people become unsure, or even forget, what being physically hungry really feels like. This is particularly so for people who have been on many diets. Most diets involve having a specific plan to follow, and actually tell us **not** to listen to what our body is saying. It should come as no surprise then, that many people have either partly or even completely lost the ability to recognise when they are physically hungry. To become aware of the difference between hungry and non-hungry eating, try to check your hunger level before and after you eat using this simple hunger/fullness scale.

10	Stuffed Full
8	Overfull
5	Full
2	Getting Empty
0	Absolutely Empty

(b) If it is non-hungry eating, why are we putting food in our mouths?

After people become aware of the frequency of their non-hungry eating, the next step is to try to understand **why** they might eat when they are not physically hungry. For any individual person, the reasons may be many and varied. Some typical examples might be: because the clock says it's lunch time, because people are feeling tired or bored, or that when they were children their parents always said they had to finish off their plate.

However, the reason we may be doing plenty of non-hungry eating may be due to particular emotions that are difficult to deal with. In this situation, non-hungry eating may well serve a very legitimate purpose, being used as a way of coping. Food is relatively cheap, it can be a quick fix in the short term, and it is legal. So it is very easy to see how food can be used to deal with many situations and to meet many different needs.

We don't want to exclude food as a way of dealing with certain situations, but we certainly want to try to develop some other options as well as food to deal with different situations that arise.

4. Being active

The importance of being active cannot be stressed too highly. Unfortunately, the word 'exercise' for many people has been associated with the 'no pain, no gain' philosophy. In other words, that it has to hurt to be worthwhile.

This is simply not true.

Always remember **whatever** activity you can do is worthwhile. The difference, for example, between taking the stairs rather than going in the lift, or walking to the shops whenever you can, rather than taking your car, can be very significant. This sort of unplanned generally non-sweaty activity can be called incidental or **non specific activity**. Walking up and down the stairs a couple of times in a day may not seem like very much, but if you look at it over a year, it adds up. A number of recent studies are highlighting this point. They show that small amounts of activity are cumulative throughout the day, and that a 'bit of activity' is significantly better for the person than no activity.

Ways of including more activity into your day without doing a specified planned activity are things like:

- ❖ walking the dog
- ❖ walking short distances instead of driving
- ❖ looking at gardens whilst walking
- ❖ pottering in the garden
- ❖ walking to the post box
- ❖ collecting the children after school on foot
- ❖ standing up to change the TV channel rather than using the remote control
- ❖ getting off the tram/bus one stop early
- ❖ getting up for a stretch and a little walk around at work
- ❖ playing games with your children that involve moving
- ❖ visiting parks

5. Body Image

Even when you feel your body is not at the most comfortable size and shape it can be, and even when you are working on a long term plan to change it, you need to try to be as accepting of your body as you can be. You might not like every part of your body, but it is important to try to come to terms with this. It is okay to want to change things, but in order to do that, you need to feel as comfortable as possible with yourself and your body. Being more accepting of your body image can be a very challenging thing to do if you are feeling uncomfortable about your size, weight and shape, but it is important to try. (Full extract: see Website - Health information / Others)

SUGGESTED READING

1. **Dieting Dilemma.** R. Stanton
Allen & Unwin
2. **Diet No More.** J. McFadden
Penguin
3. **Real Gorgeous** K. Cooke
Allen & Unwin
4. **Overcoming Overeating**
J. Hirschmann and C. Munter, Cedar Books
5. **If Not Dieting. Then What?**
R. Kausman., Allen & Unwin

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