

# DIET-FREE WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

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## PART 1

**Is it possible to reach a healthy weight without any prescribed diet, exercise plan, pills or even drastic approaches such as lap band surgery? Yes. The self-centered approach discussed in this article will help you achieve a comfortable weight that is right for you, without feeling deprived. We will look at how to enjoy food without guilt, improve self-esteem, develop a better relationship with food, be engaged with your body when it comes to hunger, and ways to enjoy being active.**

Each year advertising companies spend millions of dollars on health campaigns and diet products. However, with an ever-increasing number of people above their healthy weight range, these attempts have clearly been ineffective.

Everybody knows that we should eat less and exercise more in order to lose weight. Most commercial programs follow the 'no pain, no gain' mentality when it comes to dieting. We must punish ourselves in order to look like the size-8 model we are promised to resemble by following the prescribed diet. But why can most of us admit to trying five or more diets and yet we are still not seeing the results?

### DIETS DON'T WORK

There is universal evidence that diets don't work. The Minnesota starvation experiment run by Janet Polivy<sup>1</sup>, Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at the University of Toronto, had a group of 32 men spend six months in starvation (very minimal food), followed by three months of eating whatever they liked. During starvation they became more anxious, irritable and lethargic. They spent most of their time thinking about food, looking at cook-books and even substituted pictures of women with food. When they entered the re-feeding phase, these once normal and healthy eaters were eating completely out of control and were more obsessed with food. This is clear evidence that restrictive diets can distort our natural instinct of eating.

Diets are a method of restricting our food intake, thereby producing quick results. However, most will regain some of the weight lost within a year and all or even more weight within five years. Most weight-loss programs use standard tables as a guideline to determine an appropriate weight. They rarely factor in other important variables such as genetics, metabolism, hormones or emotional feelings. Years ago, the word 'diet' meant a way of eating, but this has evolved over time to a way of not eating.



**Dr Rick Kausman**, author of the book 'If Not Dieting, Then What?', defines the word diet in a nutshell:

**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.

**T** for temporary, which is what most people get if they go on a diet - a temporary change.

Most diet companies are successful because they can produce fast results and many return customers. The reason so many people go back again and again is because they are trapped in a vicious diet cycle, often for years, and have no knowledge of how to escape.

## VICIOUS DIET CYCLE

Diets at first seem like the right choice. You start to feel in control and the results are often instant when reducing certain foods and calories. Eventually though, with less calorie intake, our natural defence mechanism kicks in. Our body goes into starvation mode, decreasing our metabolism and increasing our desire for food. We are likely to have less energy to work through our busy days. Emotional deprivation also sets in.

Food is a major part of any social gathering. If you are deprived of the pleasure of eating, you are inevitably going to feel emotionally deprived in some way. This leads to the tendency of ditching the rules and eating outside the structured plan. We are then more likely to overeat or binge. We are left feeling angry and out of control. Guilt sets in and we recall that feeling of being in control while dieting, hence we go back to the beginning, hoping that our willpower will be stronger next time.

Is willpower the real problem? Willpower is a great skill to have in life, but it is mostly useful only for short-term tasks such as studying, work or competitive sport. Eating, on the other hand, is long-term and a requirement to survive. Relying on willpower to develop a long-term eating pattern through following a diet will inevitably lead to physical and emotional deprivation. This in turn will leave you chasing your tail in reaching your most healthy weight.

## Let's look at some fundamental concepts to help us escape this vicious cycle.

### POSITIVE ATTITUDE TO FOOD

**W**hen dieting, food often tends to be our worst enemy. But really, what is food? Generally regarded as the primary source of nourishing our body, food provides the necessary fuel to function. However, we should avoid labelling food as 'good' or 'bad'. Such terms are likely to have a negative effect on developing healthy eating patterns. Although this concept can be quite challenging at first, try to view all food as being neutral. Yes, it is helpful to know which types of food are healthier for our body and we can refer to these as our 'everyday foods'. Yet it is equally acceptable to enjoy foods

purely for their taste and not necessarily their nutritional value; these should be considered as our 'occasional foods'.

'Occasional foods' should be eaten with awareness, slowly savouring the taste in each mouthful. By not restricting yourself and knowing that you can eat it again whenever you please, you might surprise yourself to realise you do not need much to satisfy your craving.

By not setting ourselves diet rules with 'good' and 'bad' foods, we come to the realisation that it is normal behaviour to eat more on some days than others, and it is okay to eat solely for the taste and not the nutritional content. It is also natural for women to experience different cravings throughout the month as our hormones fluctuate.



## motivation

# NUTRITION V INTUITION

Another concept that has unfortunately become distorted in the constant diet world is the balance between nutrition and intuition. All meal plans, eating plans or whatever way the word 'diet' is disguised as, are simply a set of rules of dos and don'ts when it comes to nutrition. By relying heavily only on nutrition, we never truly understand what hunger means, what we feel like eating, or more importantly, the fundamental long-term weight management skill of listening to our body.

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## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

As an exercise, try to view all foods as neutral, rather than eating what you think is best for you. Ask yourself what you really feel like, knowing you have no restrictions. If your choice is something for taste only, enjoy it mindfully for what it is. You might surprise yourself and need less of the taste for now, as you know you can have more of it later.

Changing our ways in managing a healthy weight by freeing ourselves from diets, treating all foods the same and trusting our body signals to regulate our nutrition will eventually set us on the right path to a long-term and sustainable weight management plan.

**In the next part of this article, we will look at mindless eating, eating with awareness, taking care of ourselves and increasing physical activity.**

Dr Rick Kausman<sup>2</sup> writes, “Following a nutritionally sound eating plan can produce a change in our eating behaviour, and result in weight loss... however, if we aren't also using our intuition and listening to how we feel, it becomes almost impossible to sustain our eating behaviour change and consequently maintain the change in our weight.”

On the other hand, if we tried to manage our weight purely on intuition we would get the same dismal results. Many would agree that, if left to eat based on their own instinct, they could eat cake every day, as it tastes so good. But ignoring the poor nutritional content would not get you any closer to a healthy weight. The secret is in getting the right balance between nutrition and intuition.

Reaching harmony by balancing the nutritional knowledge with your natural instincts of what you feel like eating is a personal journey. For some, the nutrition/intuition connection can develop naturally over time. Chronic dieters, for instance, may find it easier to forget about nutrition until a better relationship is developed with food. By firstly reconnecting with your intuition, the nutritional balance will naturally fall into place.

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1 Janet Polivy, 'Psychological Consequences of Food Restriction', Journal of the American Dietetic Association vol. 96, no.6, June 1996, pp 589-92

2 Kausman, Rick, If Not Dieting, Then What?, Allen & Unwin, 1994.