

Healthy Eating Via Healthy Thinking

When it comes to finding the optimal eating plan for shedding excess pounds, I, like many ambitious, motivated and sufficiently self-deprecating Americans, have tried several. There was the “not a low-carb diet” low-carb diet that had me craving any and all grain products, including dog biscuits. Then there was the recently revived “Master Cleanse Plan,” which can’t officially call itself a “diet” because you don’t actually consume any food while on it. I lasted exactly 7 hours, 18 minutes and 31 seconds, which, ironically was the same amount of time it took my friend to gain back the 8 lbs. she had lost on that one. And then there was the peanut butter diet which, although hands-down the most fun, still has me wondering if it was actually a weight-gain, not a weight-loss plan.

So, what have I gained, besides weight, in this “research?” Confirmation of the undeniable fact that there is no single “ideal” eating plan to lose and keep off extra weight (I know, it hurts writing it almost as much as it does hearing it). Any sound nutritionist will tell you that a good guideline is to eat plenty of high-fiber foods like veggies, fruits and whole-grains with a balance of proteins and healthy fats. But the better ones will also point out that, even eating like this, losing and keeping excess weight off will not happen until emotional, non-hunger motivated eating is recognized and managed. In other words, healthy eating habits require healthy thinking habits.

If you are still reading, I applaud you, because this hard, cold truth certainly does not qualify as the easy, quick-fix solution I know I wish existed. But with tenacity comes rewards, so here are just a couple of especially helpful mental fitness tips that have helped many lose and keep off extra weight.

Re-think deprivation: I’m betting lots of you are thinking (and hoping) I will tell you to stop depriving yourselves and eat whatever you want, and as much as you want, and let hunger be your only guide. I have heard this well-intended advice many times over and, as much as I wish it worked for most, it is unrealistic, at least initially, for most. For people who have frequently dieted, hunger and satiation signals are equally, if not more, tied to emotions than actual physiological need. Therefore, practicing some reasonable structure and restraint with food choices is a necessary step towards weight loss until hunger and satiation signals return to normal.

As I illustrated at the start of this article, I certainly am not a proponent of very low calorie diets or restricting major food groups, as these approaches will genuinely put you in a state of deprivation, and set you up physiologically (and emotionally) to overeat. But, eating reasonable portions of certain foods that help you feel satisfied and full, and incorporating, but also limiting, foods that are “empty” nutritionally should not be thought of as deprivation but, rather, as healthy limit setting. For most of us, the latter feels very depriving at times, and this is often because we’ve become accustomed to feeding our emotional needs through food. Here are some common food thoughts driven by emotion rather than nutritional needs which might sound familiar:

“I was too stressed to eat healthily today. I can just start over tomorrow.”

“I make myself workout every day, so I can’t be expected to watch my portions, too.”

“Ugh, I’ve already blown it, so no point in trying to eat healthy today.”

In all of these statements, feelings of deprivation do exist, but they likely will not be satisfied (except very temporarily) by overeating or eating junk foods. By passing on the excess food and instead feeding yourself what you really need at such times (a foot-massage, a break from the treadmill, a friend to talk to, etc.) you will be making the most nurturing, satisfying choice while also continuing to move towards your health goals.

Skip the harsh judgments: Some argue that judging ourselves harshly is good because it keeps us “in line” and more motivated. But, if beating ourselves up on a frequent basis truly facilitated positive results, I’m thinking there would be a lot more people walking around in a state of pure bliss and a lot less struggling with their weight. For long-term positive results, we serve ourselves better to be honest in our evaluation of ourselves without falling into unreasonable expectations, demeaning statements or perfectionist thinking.

Take, for example, a morning following a particularly interactive night with the contents of your pantry. Your first thoughts as you rise may go to self-comparisons with farm animals and circus attractions. I promise that such negative self-talk will eventually, if not immediately, send you seeking comfort in that same box of cookies that got you to this negative state in the first place.

A thought process that would be more beneficial at such moments might go something like, “OK, so I definitely overdid it last night, but that was just a temporary set-back, and I can get back on track right now by eating a healthy breakfast and heading to the gym.” That’s it, enough said. No need to tell yourself how awful you are, that you shouldn’t have done “x” and that you had better do “y.” Just move on. You (hopefully) wouldn’t put that guilt trip on your best friend, so don’t put it on yourself.

So, as disappointing as it is to know that there really is no quick fix when it comes to healthy eating for shedding excess pounds, the good news is that substantial and lasting changes can be made. It may take a bit more effort and time than you (and I) might like. But, as we all know, true rewards really don’t come any other way.