

**THE SHANGRI-LA DIET**  
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## **Questions for Seth Roberts**

### **Author of THE SHANGRI-LA DIET**

#### **1. How did a psychologist get involved in weight loss theory?**

I wanted to lose weight. I had been lecturing to my introductory psychology class about weight control. My lecture contained some advice on how to lose weight so when I wanted to lose weight I thought a good first step would be to see if that advice actually worked. It turned out that it did work. It wasn't standard advice; it was advice I had gotten by reading many research papers. That little bit of success got me started. I began to wonder what else the experts didn't know. And I realized I might find out by studying myself.

#### **2. You write that much of what we've been told by experts about weight loss is "doughnut truth"—that is, there's a major hole in it. What would you say is the biggest misconception that sabotages weight loss?**

The biggest misconception is this: To lose weight you must try to eat less. That's so close to what people want to hear – they want to hear that that idea is false -- that it's almost embarrassing to say. But it *is* the biggest misconception. The reason that obesity has been such a difficult problem, so intractable, is that the standard ideas about what causes obesity are so wrong. Imagine trying to get out of a room with a closed door if you don't know what a doorknob is. It's really really difficult. That's the situation we've been in. Whereas if you know how a doorknob works, it's easy to get out of the room. The correct idea about weight loss is that to lose weight you must eat *more* of certain foods – foods that lower your set point. When you do that, weight loss is easy. Because it's easy to eat more.

**3. You say that associative learning plays a critical role in weight control. Can you explain that in lay terms?**

Associative learning is what Pavlov studied. Associative learning is learning to associate two events, like a bell and food. At the heart of my theory of weight control is the idea that we associate flavors with calories. If we eat something with calories, its flavor becomes associated with calories. The most obvious change when a flavor becomes associated with calories is that it tastes better. I think most people can remember their first sip of wine. It didn't taste very good. As you drink wine again and again, it tastes better and better. This happens because the flavor of wine becomes better associated with calories. When I buy a new flavor of jam, it tastes better and better as I get toward the bottom of the jar. That's the obvious effect of a flavor-calorie association: the flavor tastes better. A not-so-obvious effect is that the food becomes more fattening.

**4. According to your theory, the Shangri-La Diet works because it lowers the body's "set point." What does that mean?**

Your set point is the weight your body wants you to be. It's like the temperature to which a thermostat is set. If your weight goes below your set point, you become hungry. Your weight control system is trying to push your weight up to your set point. It becomes hard to resist eating and gaining weight. If your set point is 150 pounds, you will probably weigh close to 150 pounds. One way to think about it is to think that the Shangri-La Diet lowers the weight at which you will become hungry. If your set point is 150 pounds you will become hungry if you go below that weight. If you weigh 150 pounds and your set point is lowered to 140 pounds, you'll be a lot less hungry than usual until your weight goes down to 140 pounds – until your weight goes below your new set point. That's how the Shangri-La Diet causes weight loss without hunger. Because it *removes* hunger until you have lost weight.

**5. Why did you use your own body to test your weight loss ideas? What did you do?**

Because I wanted to lose weight. Also, it was a hundred times easier than doing an experiment where other people tried my weight loss ideas. Over ten years, I tried about a dozen different new ways of losing weight. I tried drinking vinegar. I tried eating very bland food. I tried standing a lot. I think I tried chewing lots of gum. The ways that worked were drinking lots of water, eating lots of sushi, eating less-processed food, eating food with a low glycemic index, and drinking sugar water. Drinking sugar water worked much much better than the other methods.

**6. The Shangri-La Diet is based on science that most obesity researchers are unaware of. How is that possible?**

The Shangri-La Diet is based on a theory that depends on research on how animals learn. Most obesity researchers consider this topic irrelevant to understanding obesity.

This is actually pretty common in science, that an accurate understanding of this or that turns out to come from an unexpected place. The most famous example is genetics. The key discovery was made by a monk – Gregor Mendel. Most biologists were unaware of his work for many years.

## **7. Why is the Shangri-La Diet so different than other diets?**

It is based on quite different ideas. My background is in the study of animal learning. Because of this background, I know a great deal about associative learning – it is the main topic in the study of animal learning. And understanding associative learning turns out to be crucial for understanding weight control. Few weight-control researchers and doctors know much about associative learning. They would never think of the theory I came up with. The theory led to the diet.

## **8. You say that “ditto” foods are the main cause of obesity today. What are they and how do they cause obesity?**

Ditto foods are foods that taste exactly the same each time you eat them. For example, most packaged food, fast food, a Starbucks Mocha Grande, homemade cake from a mix, and granola from the bulk section of the supermarket. These foods have replaced homemade foods in our diet. And homemade foods vary more in flavor from one time to the next than ditto foods. For example, meatloaf you buy from a deli will taste more similar from one time to the next than meatloaf you make yourself from scratch (not using a mix). When a food’s flavor is exactly the same each time, eating the food repeatedly will produce a much stronger flavor-calorie association than repeatedly eating a similar food whose flavor varies a lot. So ditto foods produce much stronger flavor-calorie associations than similar homemade food. The more strongly the flavor of a food is associated with calories, the more fattening it is. So ditto foods are more fattening than similar homemade foods.

## **9. What effect has the Internet had on this diet?**

After it was written about in a Freakonomics column in the *New York Times*, someone started a blog with a comments section in which people could report their success or failure with the diet ([annhendricksshangrila.blogspot.com](http://annhendricksshangrila.blogspot.com)). There were eventually many postings and they gave me a better idea of what does and doesn’t work. Mostly people succeeded; that was very encouraging. I was pleased to see my ideas had a kind of life of their own -- people could use them to lose weight just by reading them. This hadn’t happened before; everyone who had tried my diet, I had it personally explained to them. The *New York Times* article happened because a friend of mine, a professor at Columbia, mentioned a paper about my diet in his blog. This was noticed by someone who had a blog with a bigger readership (Marginal Revolution). He wrote about my paper. And that’s how it came to the attention of the Freakonomics guys.

## **10. How can I tell what my set point is?**

For most people, their set point is close to their weight. If you are hungry all the time, your set point is above your weight. If you have little appetite, get full very quickly, or never feel hungry, your set point is below your weight.

**11. You write that sprinkling cinnamon on pizza will make it less fattening. Seriously? Why?**

Yep, seriously. Because it makes the pizza taste less familiar. My theory says that a food becomes more fattening as it becomes more familiar. A Chicago doctor did an experiment where people added flavors to all of their foods. The flavors they added changed every month. They lost quite a bit of weight. So it's not just theory, there's evidence, too.

**12. What makes this diet not a fad diet?**

It's based on accurate ideas about weight control. The truth doesn't go in and out of fashion. I like to think the Shangri-La diet will slowly be rendered unnecessary by changes in how we eat – so that no one gets fat in the first place. I think real prevention of obesity is coming but I'm not sure what form it will take. One possibility is that people will be careful to avoid ditto foods. Anyone can do this; you just have to randomly flavor your food. Or never buy the same food twice. Another possibility is that food companies will stop making ditto foods. They will make foods that intentionally vary in flavor. Real prevention of obesity won't be based on getting lots of exercise. In the 1950s, 50 years ago, Americans were much thinner than now. They got less exercise, too. They weren't in good shape. They weren't eating a low-fat diet. They weren't eating a low-carb diet. They were much thinner because they ate much less ditto food.