

## A tubby hurrah!

Seth Robert's *Shangri-La Diet* was released this week, and I received and read it yesterday. Long-time readers know I'm already a huge fan of this diet since September when the *New York Times* printed an article on it and shalinerd mentioned it to me. The book is definitely worth a read, not just because it compiles most of the scattered information you'll find online, but because it's more thorough and provides helpful suggestions that I hadn't seen elsewhere. There's also a helpful appendix laying out fascinating rat hunger research that came prior to Robert's own self-experimentation, lest anyone think he made it all up.

This diet might be the only exception to my entry on how dieting (safely) is hard (but with some caveats, which I'll note later). In a nutshell, you take 100-400 calories worth of plain sugar water or flavorless oil every day at least one hour before and/or after any meals. Any deviation from this won't work long-term, though it may work short-term (for instance don't use roasted sesame oil, Splenda, sweet tea, etc.). Taking in flavorless or unfamiliar tasting calories (pure sweet counts as flavorless, Roberts admits that he doesn't know why) triggers your body to lower the weight at which it wants to be, the "set point," because it thinks that food is not in plenty, so your appetite drops in response. Pre-civilized man wouldn't have functioned well being uselessly ravenous when no food was available. This may explain why people on tube feedings often lose their appetite. If your appetite doesn't go down naturally from the sugar or oil, then take in more calories from the sugar or oil until you hit a point that works for you. And that's pretty much it.

I was happy to see that Roberts addresses concerns about excess sugar and prefers using oil instead. He encourages you to eat the rest of your calories healthfully (he eats low GI foods and lots of veggies). There's plenty of detail on alternative ways of doing the diet, namely via unique new flavor combinations and creative home cooking. He even noted comments from people for whom the diet did not work and also noted early on that it might not work well without some diet changes in people who need to lose more than sixty pounds.

So now we come to me. I don't do the diet anymore. This has nothing to do with whether it works--it does work! Really! Doing The Shangri-La Diet ultimately showed me several ways not to have to do the diet. How's that for irony? To use a bad analogy (bad because pills are dangerous and this diet isn't), back when the extremely effective appetite suppressant Phen-Fen was pulled off the market for killing people, most people on it gained their weight right back. There were, however, a small number of people who didn't. Why not? Well Phen-Fen taught them that large portions would make them too full, so they downsized their portions and stopped high-cal snacking. Those healthy habits stuck around when they were forced off the drug and managed to stay around.

This diet taught me similar lessons. First, and most important, it taught me that I must wait one hour after any kind of food to feel sated, not just sugar water or oil. Even an attack of screaming ravenous hunger half an hour after a small snack abates. It taught me to say, "Look, if you want to eat one dozen pepperoni pizzas, fine, do it, just wait about 45 minutes, okay?" By the time the 45 minutes passed, I was back to normal. Second, the sugar water taught me that I really do need more carbs. I refuse to purposely low-carb, but sometimes I overdid the protein/veggie thing to the point where I was an accidental low-carber, and my fatigue and cravings showed. Third, it was while doing the oil version of the diet that my year-long fight with painful anal fissures ended. The fissures came right back shortly after I stopped the oil, and it was only after weeks of experimentation to rule out milk allergies and lactose intolerance that I spotted the fat pattern in my food diaries. Not only was I accidentally low-carbing, I was low-fatting. Now I aim for 30% of my calories from fat. Before, I was likely at 10%, possibly even less. No wonder my lifelong shiny hair showed signs of dulling and my fingernails started peeling.

I stopped taking the sugar or oil and my new habits stuck. Now I eat three medium meals, two small snacks, run in the morning, walk in the evening, and strength train two to three times a week. Fiber, lean protein, healthy fats, and plenty of fruits and veggies make up the bulk of my meals. I'm like a poster child for the new Food Pyramid, but even better because I generally blow the five servings of fruit and veggies out of the water. And because I learned the most important lesson of patience, my intense PMS cravings and ovulation binges have finally tamed. So I don't need the diet right now, but if I ever do, I'll be right back on it. Next time I'll go with a combination of shaken oil, warm water, and some thickening fiber to help emulsify it all (the oil is a little hard to swallow alone) with just a bit of sugar to help it taste less weird.

Now, the caveats. Roberts admits that his promise of not having to change your diet (just eat less naturally via appetite control) may not work if you want to lose more than sixty pounds. Since I've lost ninety, mostly via traditional means, it's less a diet for me than another tool in my box. He also admits that this isn't going to address emotional eating (not a problem of mine) or people who eat for exciting flavor sensations (my weakness). Also I suspect, based on some general comments at online blogs, that the diet may work less well for women. Women have lower metabolisms to begin with, generally have higher bodyfat percentages, and, I suspect, have more resistant set points. Men who are too thin can still produce sperm and kill mastodons for a nice beeswax candlelight dinner. Women who are too thin can't bring a baby to full term, much less breastfeed and nourish the child. So women may stay hungrier in order to have the motivation to nag their cavehubbies to drag home more mastodon mignon. "The cave baby's not going to feed itself with my empty caveboobs!" I imagine her saying, only with poorer grammar.

For people who have moderate amounts of weight to lose, however, go for it. I'm a health nut, a cynic, and a pessimist, and I vouch for it. One week, a little

tinkering and eating cheap stuff you probably already have around the house will let you know if it works. If it doesn't, you're out, what, a quarter? That's very little to lose. Plus there's the excitement of getting in on the ground floor. I love it when something new comes along and blows everybody's minds. Word of mouth is spreading, and I hope this gets big. It could all go to crap as doctors rail and nutritionists cry and stupid people who don't do the diet right complain. But one thing is certain: It will be fun as hell to watch. My greatest hope is that the science in the book spawns related research that finally settles some of the mysterious and counter-intuitive conclusions that are drawn. I have this powerful sense that long-locked doors will finally open, and this is one huge key. There are so many complicated reasons for obesity. Let's not only add to the pile but blow it up.\_

\_ Sorry about all the metaphor abuse.

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