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MAGIC ELIXIR?

A POPULAR NEW DIET CLAIMS YOU CAN TRICK YOUR BODY INTO LOSING WEIGHT WITH FLAVORLESS OILS AND SUGAR WATER. BUT ARE THE EFFECTS MOSTLY MIND OVER MATTER? SUSAN ORENSTEIN EXAMINES A CASE STUDY IN FAD DIETING

I feel the lure of the happy ending. I'm sitting across the table from Seth Roberts, PhD, a UC Berkeley psychology professor turned diet book author, as he explains his weight-loss theory, the latest in a field littered with faded stars and hopeful contenders. To effortlessly cut your appetite, he tells me, you should drink sugar water or extra-light olive oil (any flavorless oil will do) between meals. At first, I find it hard to get past the sheer weirdness of what he's saying. But that's offset by Roberts' earnestness, and I find myself wanting to follow his logic about our caveman programming and how the flavors of modern food have thrown our bodies out of whack. Could it be, I think between bites of the seafood meal we share in a Northern California bistro, that he's onto something?

Given my own checkered diet history, I quickly regain my skepticism in the light of day, but I'm not alone in feeling a tug. Since he published *The Shangri-La Diet: The No Hunger Eat Anything Weight-Loss Plan* (Putnam) last April, Roberts has seen his name shoot as high as No. 2 on Amazon and made the *New York Times* how-to best-seller list. But it is online that he has turned his diet into an of-the-moment phenomenon: His editor and publicists sent his book to bloggers, and in his Web forum, which has amassed more than 15,000 posts, he runs a sort of virtual support group, e-mailing personalized tips directly to Shangri-La followers.

If his methods are unusual for a diet book author, they also tap into familiar emotional terrain. Diets have long appealed to the true believer within us, and they depend on one to lead the way. At 53, Roberts lacks the slickness that would invite people to write him off. Casually dressed and slightly rumpled, he came by his convictions through exhaustive and directed self-experimentation. Looking for a drug-free sleep remedy, he tracked his sleep patterns and mood every day for years, devising varied theories to test. After crunching the data, he found that standing for more of the day helped him sleep better, as did skipping breakfast and getting A.M. sun exposure. Surprisingly, watching talking heads on TV in the morning improved his mood. "I've learned things that have had a huge effect on my quality of life," he says.

Roberts started developing his Shangri-La theory when his own weight crept up on a diet of deli food and scones. While hardly huge at 5'11" and 200 pounds, he again turned his obsessive study on himself, though he had no background in nutrition. "I think much of what people have been told is misleading," he says, taking aim at the notion that weight is simply about calories in versus calories out. Reading both human and animal studies, Roberts came to believe that the flavor of food has been overlooked in discussions of weight. In an experiment he cites in his book, a scientist in Quebec and his study subjects first tried to lose weight by cutting calories and eating their regular food; they felt tormented by hunger. When they tried to lose weight by drinking bland nutrition drinks, it came off without struggle. Roberts claims that when eaten repeatedly, quickly digested foods with a strong, consistent flavor raise your set point—or the weight where your body naturally settles. In caveman days, it made sense that when food was plentiful (and full of flavor and calories) our set points would rise, leading us to fatten up in anticipation of leaner times. When food was scarcer—and tasty as a dry leaf—our set points would fall. We'd live off stored fat and feel less hungry.

In this era of never-ending abundance, Roberts' diet is about tricking the body into thinking food is scarce. Because we learn over time to associate a food's flavor with calories, those that are unfamiliar won't raise our set point. (One of Roberts' more novel ideas is that the foods that make us fat, such as fast

PHOTOGRAPHED BY THIEMO SANDER

food, always taste exactly the same.) He's found what he calls zero-set-point foods—namely, the sugar water and extra-light olive oil—which he claims deliver calories without any flavor at all, bringing about an effortless drop in appetite. His plan doesn't prescribe what to eat, other than a few tablespoons of the oil or sugar dissolved in water between meals (measurements depend on how much weight you want to lose).

Despite his diet's high wackiness quotient, Roberts' ideas—which he says enabled him to shed 35 pounds easily—draw on theories that aren't so radical. No one disputes that we're programmed to keep on eating when food is available. Set points have been discussed for years, though there's no monopoly on trying to lower them. "That's the holy grail for myself and all the pharmaceutical companies that spend billions of dollars a year on this," says Ken Fujioka, director of Nutritional and Metabolic Research at the Scripps Clinic Center for Weight Management in San Diego. "No one's been able to do it."

Increasingly, researchers are exploring whether rich, flavorful foods affect our appetite. "Palatability plays an important role," says Louis Aronne, director of New York's Comprehensive Weight Control Program at Weill Cornell Medical Center (who hasn't read Roberts' book). "If you feed sugar and fat combinations to animals, that makes them eat more. It tends to cause a breakdown in body weight regulation." While several experts could only speculate why sugar water would cut hunger, they tell me that the oil might slow stomach emptying and bring about a feeling of fullness. Still, skeptics will find plenty to chew on; if our ancestors lost their appetites when food was scarce, why wouldn't they have taken a nap in their caves (and died) instead of going off hunting? I can't understand why sugar water doesn't "count" as a flavor. And individuals vary—while Roberts says friends tried out his diet and he tested it on six subjects, who all lost weight, he's done no large-scale or controlled studies.

"THE MINUTE YOU START TRACKING WHAT YOU DO WITH YOUR WEIGHT, EVERYBODY SEEMS TO LOSE."

But then, few weight-loss programs do. Some amount of faith is part of dieting, an industry that's amazingly robust despite its dismal track record. Dry data is not as compelling as a plausible story, especially one with a convention-flouting protagonist. Is it possible that the trick is not of the oil and the sugar water, but of the mind? If there is a magic elixir, perhaps it's more complex than Roberts' book jacket touts. As I read post after post on his forums, I recognize their searching tone, the ebullience over a skipped dessert. I could relate to the woman who wrote over a series of days that she was sure the diet was working; then she wasn't—did anyone have any tips? "It's hard, when I really really want this to work," she wrote.

Over and over, researchers told me that wanting is a crucial element in any diet. They see it in their own studies, when the placebo group does unusually well. "The minute you start tracking what you do with your weight, everybody seems to lose," Fujioka says. From the start, someone investing in buying a book wants it to work, and could feel more positive about exercising or eating well, making changes that affect weight that have nothing to do with a given diet.

Howard Brody, director of the Institute for the Medical Humanities at the University of Texas Medical Branch and author of *The Placebo Response*, offers an analogy. "If you told some people, 'Your genes will make you skinny as a rail,' and others, 'Yours are for being a fat slob,' I'd bet money that their weight would change in the direction you told them. Given that people have such strong feelings about weight and eating, they're potentially very susceptible to mind/body influences." He notes that some of the strongest placebo responses have been demonstrated with pain; similarly, hunger is both a physical urge and a subjective sensation (who, after all, hasn't lost their appetite over grief or love?).

"Hunger means a lot of different things, even within the same person," says Charles Billington, the associate director of the Minnesota Obesity Center. "Sometimes it has nothing to do with energy needs, but it's 'I haven't had a cookie for a while and I need one.' "

Could belief in his ideas have influenced Roberts' own results? The idea is absurd, he tells me, sounding the testiest I've heard him. "When people have tried 10 different diets, and this one [succeeds], why would it be a placebo effect?" He notes that he tried other methods that failed, like drinking vinegar, before finding that sugar water and olive oil worked, and claims the postings on his forums show his diet's success rate is "well above 50 percent." (Arguably, self-selection skews postings toward the positive, and studies have shown that online counseling may boost weight loss.) Roberts sends me a 2001 study concluding that the placebo effect is greatly exaggerated, and it's true that the field is controversial. Still, the research intrigues me. In a recent study, when runners given ordinary tap water were told it was superoxygenated, they ran significantly faster.

Certainly there are Shangri-La adherents who testify to the diet's effectiveness. "I eat like a thin person!" gushes Ruth Heasman, a 33-year-old British woman. "It sounds too good to be true, but it makes it easy to give up your vices." Still, Heasman pauses when I ask if her newfound ease around food might be rooted in her psyche. "When you start a diet you get an excitement about it," she reflects. "I kept asking, 'Am I hungry? Am I hungry?' I was waiting for this hunger effect to kick in." The placebo possibility has begun to pop up in online chatter, with one man noting he gained five pounds on the olive oil.

The real test will come in a year, or maybe five, which marks the only milestone that counts: keeping off lost weight. Until then, some say, what matters is the newness of Roberts' ideas; as he likes to point out, a recent Nobel Prize winner famously employed self-experimentation in showing that bacteria can cause stomach ulcers. "[Roberts] is very original. Those are the most important people in science," says Michel Cabanac, the Quebec scientist whose study Roberts cited.

Meanwhile, I track down the woman who posted that she wasn't sure if Shangri-La was working for her. She's since moved on, she tells me, to a different diet book. □