

THE SHANGRI-LA DIET
By Seth Roberts
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Contact:
Katie McKee
Publicist
212-366-2534

Katie.Mckee@us.penguingroup.com

Behind the Book

By

Seth Roberts, Ph.D.

The Shangri-La diet is drinking small amounts of unflavored sugar water and/or flavorless oil. You drink the sugar water and oil in *addition* to your regular food. They reduce your appetite, so you eat less and lose weight. It is probably the simplest and most counter-intuitive diet ever. It is based on a lot of research by other scientists, my own self-experimentation, and a theory of weight control that I developed.

In a way, it started with acne. When I was a graduate student in experimental psychology, I read an article about teaching mathematics that said “the best way to learn is to do.” To learn how to do experiments, I decided, I should try to do as many as possible. To do more experiments, I started to self-experiment. One of my self-experiments was about acne: I measured the effectiveness of the treatments (pills and a cream) that my dermatologist had prescribed.

When I started, I believed that the pills were powerful and the cream had no effect. To my surprise, my experiments showed that the opposite was true: The pills had no effect and the cream was quite helpful. This was the beginning of my belief that self-experimentation can be quite useful. I had found a better solution than my dermatologist.

Many years later, I wanted to lose 40 pounds. During the intervening years, self-experimentation had helped me further reduce my acne, improve my sleep, and solve other problems of daily life. I turned to it again. My plan was to try various diets – not

just to see what works (everyone does this) but to see if I could learn something about the body's weight control system. When you understand how something works, it is easier to fix.

I tried many diets, from the conventional (eating less-processed food) to the difficult (drinking large amounts of water) to the odd (drinking vinegar). Some worked, some didn't. The results, along with some research articles I read, led me to a new theory of weight control. My theory began with the old idea that the body has a set point for weight. The body tries to keep your weight at your set point much like a thermostat tries to keep a room at the set temperature. The thermostat turns heaters on and off; your body turns hunger on and off. My innovation was the idea that the set point is controlled by the flavors of what you eat. Foods with strong flavor-calorie associations raise the set point. Foods with weak or no flavor-calorie associations lower the set point.

My theory helped me find new ways of losing weight – one of them sustainable (eating foods with a low glycemic index), one of them not (eating lots of sushi). This was good support for the theory – it isn't easy to find new ways of losing weight.

Armed with a good source of ideas (my theory) and a good way to test them (self-experimentation), I was two-thirds of the way to a radically different method of weight loss (the Shangri-La diet). The missing ingredient was luck. As THE SHANGRI-LA DIET relates, I finally found it in Paris. My lucky break was a heat wave, which caused me to drink lots of unfamiliar, sugar-sweetened sodas. This took my appetite away for days. The experience led me to discover that plain sugar water, in surprisingly small amounts, produces a great deal of weight loss (I lost 35 pounds in three months, and have kept it off for five years). The sugar water provides calories without flavor, which lowers the body's set point. Later I used extra-light olive oil instead of sugar water as my source of calories, with equal success. When my friends lost lots of weight using my methods, I came to believe that they could help many people.