

Transcript of 2006-03-28 Penguin podcast

Hi, I'm Seth Roberts. My new book is called *The Shangri-La Diet*. It's very simple. All you do is drink flavorless oil or unflavored sugar water between meals. You do this *in addition* to eating whatever you usually eat. The oil or sugar water causes you to lose interest in food, so you eat less and lose weight.

As far as I can tell, thousands of people have tried it. They've lost weight, and they've also been pleased in other ways. I've heard many pleasantly-surprising comments from them.

Here's one: "Ridiculously easy. And cheap. And effective. What hath God wrought?"

Here's another comment: "Since I have been doing this, my between-meal cravings have all but disappeared, and for the first time in my life I can look at something like popcorn, chocolate, potato chips, French fries, etc., and say "I'm not hungry" and pass it up."

Here's another comment: "I'm so grateful for not thinking about food all the time." I heard a lot of comments like this. They were the reason I decided to call it the Shangri-La diet. Shangri-La was a peaceful place, and this diet puts people at peace with food.

Here's another comment: "Last week a neighbor dropped off a piece of chocolate cake and it actually went stale. I forgot it was there. Unheard of. . . . There is no willpower involved here. I still don't have any willpower. I'm just not hungry for those things."

Here's a final comment: "I can't say enough about the dramatic switch in the way I feel about food. I'm beginning to think normally and act normally."

The Shangri-La diet is very different from other diets. There are no forbidden foods. You never go hungry. You never eat lots of one type of food. You can eat really healthy; you can eat really unhealthy. You can eat whatever you think is best.

The Shangri-La diet is so different than other diets because it's based on new ideas -- on a new theory of weight control. When you understand how something works it's a lot easier to fix it when it malfunctions. When you don't understand how something works, it's often difficult or impossible to fix. That's the situation we've been in with obesity. We've had the wrong ideas about weight control -- so it's no surprise that most people find it very difficult to lose weight.

Let me tell you some of the right ideas.

First, *your body's weight control system has a set point*. Your set point is the weight your weight-control system wants you to be - like the temperature to which a thermostat is set. It's very hard to weigh much less than your set point. For example, suppose your set point is 200 pounds. Your weight-control system will try to keep you at 200 pounds by changing how hungry you are. When you go below 200 pounds, you'll become more hungry than usual. When you go above 200 pounds, you'll become less hungry than usual. The Shangri-La diet works by lowering your set point. It uses your natural weight-control system to help you lose weight.

Another key idea is: *your set point depends on what you eat*. Some foods raise your set point. Other foods lower it. The Shangri-La diet is based on the discovery that certain foods - namely, flavorless oils and sugar water -- lower your set point a lot. The more of those foods you eat, the lower your set point will be. Even a small amount of them per day will lower your set point a lot.

A third key idea is: *your set point depends on the flavor of what you eat*. Not fat content. Not calories. Not carbs. Flavor. An oil like canola oil lowers your set point a lot because it has plenty of calories but no flavor -- unlike almost any other food. Sweetness doesn't count as a flavor; that's why unflavored sugar water is another food that lowers your set point a lot.

These ideas are based on a long history of research. The notion of a set point, the first idea, is very common in physiology. Lots of variables within our bodies, such as body temperature, are believed to be regulated by systems with set points. Half a century ago someone suggested that body fat was regulated that way. The idea that your set point is controlled by what you eat was proposed in the 1960s. Its main advocate has been a Canadian physiologist named Michel Cabanac. In the 1970s, he and a colleague did a fascinating experiment in which people lost weight when they ate bland monotonous food. They could eat as much as they wanted, but they still lost weight. They lost weight without becoming more hungry than usual, which showed that their set point had gone down.

I started to develop my ideas about weight control around 1990. One day at the gym I discovered that I weighed 200 pounds. That was too much. 199 pounds -- well, okay, I can live with that; 200 pounds: absolutely not, must lose weight. I wondered what to do. As part of an introductory psychology class, I'd been giving a lecture about weight control. One of the things I had been telling my students was that the better food tastes, the more fattening it is. One of the things we do to food to make it taste better is process it -- we juice it, we peel it, we chop it, we cook it, we add spices, and so on. This gave me the idea to try eating food that has been less processed -- food that is closer to its natural state. For example, instead of a glass of orange juice, have an orange. Instead of white rice, have brown rice. I made many little changes like that. What happened was -- it worked! I lost about 13 pounds quite easily.

This was a revelation to me. The notion of eating less-processed food -- oranges instead of orange juice -- was my idea. It wasn't in a scientific article somewhere; I hadn't seen it in any book. Because I had lost weight easily, apparently I knew something important the experts did not. It wasn't the most brilliant idea in the world, but it had truly helped me. And it wasn't easy to explain why it had worked. Back then, low-fat diets were popular. My new diet wasn't low fat. It wasn't low carb, either. It didn't fit any popular category. I had learned something the experts didn't know and I had learned it in a simple way: by self-experimentation. This surprised me. I had thought, as you may think, that you can only learn something new through a large and expensive research study. Self-experimentation was free, and not even difficult. Maybe I could use self-experimentation to learn more new and useful things about weight control.

Over the next 10 years, that's what I tried to do. I tried about ten unusual ways of losing weight. I did learn some new things. I found that drinking lots of water caused moderate weight loss. I don't recommend this--it was way too hard. I found that eating lots of sushi caused moderate weight loss. I don't recommend this, either. It was too expensive and too much raw fish. I found that eating foods with a low glycemic index -- foods that are digested slowly -- caused moderate weight loss. Nowadays this is a common weight-loss idea but ten years ago it was not. I do recommend this way of losing weight; it was easy, and easy to sustain. I never regained the weight I lost this way -- but I only lost 6 pounds.

Along with all this self-experimentation, I also kept reading scientific articles about weight control. In 1995 I read an article by a psychologist named Israel Ramirez that inspired me to think of the new theory of weight control on which the diet is based. My new theory connected with my self-experimentation because it could explain many of my results. My theory predicted that eating foods that are digested slowly should cause weight loss; it also predicted that bland foods, such as sushi, should cause weight loss. These were results that conventional ideas about weight control could not explain. Because my theory did a good job of explaining what I had observed, I came to believe my theory.

The fact that I believed my theory was really important. It was important because my theory turned out to predict something that was so hard to believe that most people would have considered it impossible -- and therefore ignored it. What happened was this. In 2000 I was in Paris. I was looking forward to eating lots of great French food but to my dismay I lost my appetite big-time. It was hard to eat anything. There was no obvious reason for my lack of appetite. My theory, however, pointed to the most surprising cause you might imagine: sugar-sweetened soft drinks. Practically every weight-loss expert in the world thinks that sugar-sweetened soft drinks cause obesity. Drink Coke, get fat -- that's what all the experts believe. Yet my theory was saying that in this case these soft drinks were causing weight *loss*.

When I got home I tested the idea that the soft drinks I had had in Paris had caused my loss of appetite. I found that my theory was correct. I also found that

unflavored sugar water between meals was incredibly potent at causing weight loss. Even small amounts cause great weight loss. This was the beginning of the Shangri-La diet. I had found a method of weight loss so powerful that I could easily weigh whatever I wanted. I used my new method to lose 35 pounds in three months. It was shocking how little hunger I felt while losing the weight -- everyone associates dieting with hunger, but I actually felt much *less* hungry than usual. It was so easy to lose weight that I became too thin. I got down to 150 pounds, and after a month or so decided to gain 10 pounds. I've been at 160 pounds ever since.

When my friends tried my diet and it worked for them, it was clearly time to write a diet book.