Why good diet advice is bad for losing weight

Like most of East London, I got into rock climbing last year. I've always done a lot of sport so I'm naturally strong, but it turns out the only thing that really matters for climbing is the finger strength to bodyweight ratio. There's two ways you can improve this. Obviously you can strengthen your fingers, but this is a slow process. Or you can lose weight, which can be much faster. I've never been good at moderation, I dropped from 89 to 80kg in 2 months (full disclosure: some lucky Norovirus timing helped at the end).

Along the way, I realised that solid diet advice was actually bad for losing weight. Most advice is focussed on how to diet without feeling hungry. They recommend eating high protein and low carb: 1 gram contains 4 calories in both cases, but the gram of protein stays in your stomach longer and will therefore be more filling. This is largely true and there's a strong academic consensus supporting it. But the problem comes from the goal of trying not to feel hungry in the first place. This leads to people thinking they must be doing something wrong when they feel hungry and inevitably breaking their diet. They end up feeling doubly bad because it doesn't usually make the hunger go away.

Why is diet advice focussed on trying to prevent hunger? The body usually tries to maintain its internal conditions in a process called homeostasis. It reacts when you disrupt it - for example it sweats when we're too hot and shivers when too cold. Hunger is the equivalent reaction to losing weight, which for most of human evolution was dangerous. But that's clearly no longer the case and, when dieting, it's probably a good thing. Indeed, **hunger is a sign that your diet is working.**

This might all seem quite obvious, but most diet advice puts you in the opposite mentality. They say just eat X or do Y and you can avoid being hungry. Rather than seeking to avoid hunger, you should instead accept it's a necessary part of dieting. When you're hungry, you should see it as a signal that you're losing weight and to stay the course. This will reduce the urge to break your diet as you see that trying to stop hunger is counter-productive. In turn, you will no longer dread dieting.

I found this switch in mentality a gamechanger. Last Winter I was training for strength, so I wanted to be heavy again to complement that. The left picture below is me in February, contemplating the fact that I was

going to have to run the Hackney half marathon in 3 months. But because I didn't dread feeling hungry, I ended up losing 10kg and fitting into my Aquaman costume pretty easily. I'd have no concerns about pulling the same stunt again next year.

To sum up, high protein / low carb diets may help to reduce hunger. But if reading this sort of advice fosters a mentality that hunger is bad, it will stop you losing weight and you'll always feel like shit when dieting. Instead you should see that hunger is the body's signal that it's about to burn fat. It's just part of dieting and it's actually a good thing. If you can recognise this, you'll lose weight much more easily.