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## General advice

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## fact sheet

This section of the website will give you some general advice on approaching weight loss and is taken from my book, *Healthy Intentions: Make it a Habit*.

Millions upon millions of people struggle trying to lose weight every day. A large number of these people fail in their attempts. Theoretically it should be easy to lose weight. Weight loss should occur if the amount of energy you use (energy expenditure) is greater than your food intake. Unfortunately your body is not a simple machine. It behaves differently and always tries to compensate for any changes that occur. The body says to itself: 'I'm not used to this, so I will try to get back to what I'm used to'. The body has at its disposal a large number of mechanisms to try to maintain your weight at the current level, so you must outsmart your body to lose weight.

### Hunger—the powerful force

The first and most important mechanism the body has at its disposal is hunger. The moment you decide to reduce your food intake, your body will give you signals to go and eat. Hunger is a very powerful primordial (primitive) signal. It is present in all animals and has been with humans since the beginning of time. It can even be painful. Resisting hunger is difficult; near impossible for most people. Hunger will drive you crazy, it will prevent you from sleeping and it will prevent you from concentrating on your work. Hunger can only be resisted for a small amount of time. And once you cave in to hunger, you will probably overeat and then feel guilty. The body is saying: 'Give me more, give me more'.

So how do you get around this problem? The solution is to eat something that contains little energy but fills you up. This low-energy, high-bulk food exists and is called fibre. By filling your stomach with fibre, it gives out signals saying: 'I'm full, stop eating now' and your hunger goes away. The reason that fibre is such a good alternative to other foods is that the body is not able to break down fibre, so it passes through your digestive system without having contributed to your fat stores. Chapter 5 will provide more detailed information on the different types of fibre and examples of what to eat.

Because hunger is one of the oldest and most powerful and emotional/physical signals, willpower alone is not going to conquer it. If there is food available and you are hungry then you are going to eat it. If there is no food available then you won't be able to eat. This may sound simplistic, but if you have a cupboard full of cookies and a fridge full of sweet or fatty foods then the temptation is going to be irresistible. So one trick in weight loss is to not have anything available at home that you are not supposed to eat. Don't have lots of cookies, chocolate and candy within reach. Fill your fridge with salad, fruit and vegetables. This way when you are hungry you will have to eat healthily, as there is nothing else to choose from.

### Fighting your own body

Apart from hunger, your body has another mechanism at its disposal to prevent you from losing weight. The second mechanism the body uses to conserve fat is to reduce the amount of energy that you use. It will reduce the Basal Metabolic Rate (BMR) so you will feel sluggish and less inclined to move, thereby conserving energy. The body is telling you to sit down as you don't have the energy to do anything more strenuous, but it will be lying

to you and keeping all of the fat in reserve. At this stage you have to keep to your exercise program and not stop your activities even if you feel tired. See Chapter 4 for more information on BMR.

In a way you are fighting your own body. Your body is trying to do everything in its power to get back the weight that you have lost and you are trying to lose more weight. The only way to overcome this is to stick with it, until your body resets its internal weight memory and accepts your new weight as the new set point. But once you reach this new set point, your body will actually help you to maintain your new weight. You will find that you are not as hungry as before, that you have more energy to do things and that maintaining the weight loss is easier.

Be careful, because unfortunately it is easier to gain weight than it is to lose it. This tendency for the body to gain weight is understandable as the body always tries to deposit any excess energy from the foods you eat as fat. Developing a new set point for your weight can take a long time, and this time frame is different in different people.

This is one of the reasons that dieting does not work. In dieting you lose a lot of weight rapidly, but the body does not have a chance to adjust to the new weight and it panics, doing everything it can to get back to your old weight. As the body is furiously trying to get the weight back it overcompensates and you end up bigger than when you started the diet. The problem is that most diets are usually of a very short duration, whereas you need to have longer-term objectives to be successful with weight loss.

## **Avoiding triggers to eat**

Nearly 90 per cent of people who want to lose weight fail. This is not only due to a lack of commitment, as many people who are trying to lose weight have a very strong commitment to this goal. The reasons are complex and much is due to the society we live in. There is easily available food everywhere you turn, from supermarkets to fast food outlets. Most people would have access to 24-hours-a-day food if they wanted to. There is also constant stimulation of your appetite by delicious food images from advertising and the people around you.

In addition, our society makes it easier and easier not to mobilise, from escalators, lifts and cars. This makes exercise difficult. From this you can see the three main strategies that you can use to improve your chances of weight loss. Firstly you need to avoid food places, secondly you need to avoid images of food and thirdly you need to maximise 'free' exercise.

### **1. Avoid food places**

You need to avoid food places as much as possible. Living in the desert with no people around you and no access to food would help you to lose weight, but is not practical for day-to-day living. So you need to use some strategies to avoid unnecessary contact with food. These strategies are aimed at reducing the time that you spend thinking about food and the time that you spend around food items. You obviously need to eat, but use these strategies to minimise your exposure to food.

You should make a detailed list of everything that you need for the coming week. If you make the list once a week you don't have to think about what food to buy every day. Also try to only shop once a week, as this will also minimise your exposure to food. If you find that you forgot something from the store try to make do without it, as going back to the store will tempt you again.

When you go to the store, buy only what is on your list. Don't go anywhere in the store where they do not have the products on your list and don't browse. The danger with browsing is that you will buy something that you didn't need to buy in the first place. These items are usually the foods that you are not supposed to eat, such as candy, chocolate or ice cream. These items, more than anything, make your mouth water and the brain will be sending out strong signals for you to buy these delicious foods. Once you give in to the temptation you will surely eat whatever you bought. The only way to avoid this happening is to be as stubborn as a mule. Follow your list to the letter and do not deviate from it.

Avoid or minimise your time in places that have a lot of aromas—such as bakeries—as the aromas will make you feel hungry. Many of these places use aromatherapy techniques to elevate the smells even more and make you even hungrier, so that they can sell more products. Don't be pulled in, be focused. To minimise any temptation to buy extra food or to snack, you should eat before you go shopping. By eating first you will feel content and not hungry. Your brain and stomach will be telling you: 'We are content, we don't need anything more'. You will not feel tempted to buy something to eat while you are out or feel inclined to buy more food than is on your list.

Another major area that causes concern is the time you spend with your family and friends. This is of course vital time, but a lot of the time it involves food. For example having a meal if you go out with friends, buying candy or popcorn if you go to the cinema, or being served potato crisps as a snack if you go to someone's home. So when you are with friends try to do something that doesn't involve food. Instead of going out for lunch or dinner with friends, go to the beach or do some sport or go for a walk. Use your imagination and not your stomach.

## **2. Avoid food images**

Everywhere you look there are images of food, food, food especially in larger cities. There are food advertisements on the television and programs show people cooking and eating food. There are billboards in the street for fast food places. Displays from shops show food. It is therefore difficult, but not impossible, to avoid all these food images. Try to identify places with the minimum number of food images. These places may include your local park, the beach or a friend's home.

Once you have identified these places, try spending as much time there as possible. Use it as a refuge if you start feeling hungry. For example try to go for a walk, run or other activity in your local park instead of sitting at home watching the television when you start feeling hungry. This will minimise the triggers that your brain receives to be hungry and eat. If you feel lazy hire a movie, which will not contain food advertisements or go to the cinema and make sure that you do not buy any snacks.

## **3. Maximise 'free' exercise**

Maximise the amount of exercise that you do during the day. As previously mentioned, one of the major reasons that there is an obesity epidemic today is that people move less than they did in the past. All the modern comforts make it easy to minimise the amount of exercise that you do throughout the day. By trying to increase the amount of activity that you do throughout the day, you will naturally increase the amount of energy that your body burns up. There are literally millions of ways to increase your energy expenditure throughout the day, from the trivial to the really big. This of course depends a lot on your personal situation, including where you live and work.

Take a piece of paper and write down all the activities that you do throughout the day and try to come up with more energy demanding ways of doing the same things. Walk up stairs instead of taking the elevator. Park your car a couple of blocks away from your office and walk the rest of the way. Use your imagination. Any activity in which you can be moving instead of being stationary you should go for. For example, read a book while standing up, do stretching exercises or push-ups while you are watching the television. More tips on exercise can be found in Chapter 3 of my book, *Healthy Intentions: Make it a Habit*.