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fact sheet

Psychology

This section of the website will give you some information on the psychology of weight loss and is taken from my book, *Healthy Intentions: Make it a Habit*. **Unless you truly want to lose weight, no amount of dieting and exercise are going to work so first you need to harness your mind!**

Your brain is a very powerful organ, so psychology plays a major part in weight loss. Most people who want to lose weight know all the basic steps, yet they fail. Consciously you too want to lose weight, but something is stopping you. You may think that you are in complete control of yourself, but your subconscious mind may have its own agenda. Even if you are telling yourself that you want to lose weight, your subconscious mind may be sabotaging your weight-loss attempts. Until you find out what the underlying reasons for your past weight-loss failures are, you will not succeed now or in the future.

In the following chapters you will learn all about weight loss, what to eat, how to exercise and lots more, but if you are sabotaging yourself you will not be successful. To be able to lose weight, you must first confront your underlying reasons for not wanting to lose weight. Once you do this it should be easy to get going with your weight loss.

What's your excuse?

We all use excuses in our daily lives to protect ourselves from being emotionally hurt. Most people who are overweight justify this by some sort of excuse, but underlying this is the real reason why they are not losing weight. To find out what your excuse is, take a piece of blank paper and write down all the reasons you have used in the past for being overweight. You should have at least two excuses written down. Now take a long hard look at these reasons. Do you believe that these are the reasons you are not losing weight? Be honest with yourself.

The following are some common reasons cited for not losing weight:

- It's in my genes (i.e. inherited from parents).
- I have always been a big person.
- I have a slow/low metabolic rate.
- I have to have my sugars or else I can't function.
- All my family members are big and that is why I am too.

- I have so many responsibilities that I don't have time to think about what I eat.
- I don't have time to exercise.
- I don't know how to lose weight.

There are many more reasons that people come up with, but basically these are all excuses. There is no reason on this earth why *you* should not be able to lose weight. Think critically, are you really convinced that these are the reasons that you are overweight? No, there is more to it than that. The real reason that you keep failing is something completely different. Why are you overweight? Don't give yourself an excuse. What benefit do you derive from being overweight? Think hard, and take out another piece of paper.

Write down what benefits you are getting from being overweight. Some of the more common ones are:

- I don't have to go out and meet people.
- I don't have to change.
- People treat me better when I'm fat.
- I use my weight as an excuse not to succeed.
- When I fail to find friends, a partner or a job I can blame my failure on my weight.
- I use my weight as a barrier to the outside world.
- I'm scared of what would happen if I managed to lose weight.
- I'm lazy and I don't want to put in the effort it takes to lose weight.

These are some of the underlying reasons why you may not be losing the weight. You have your reasons, which you must think very hard about. When you have found your reasons and written them down, keep the paper on the side. Take out another piece of paper and write down what you think would be the positives of losing weight. Now compare the two pieces of papers. Unless you are convinced that the positives of losing weight are of greater benefit than the positives for keeping the weight on, you will not lose weight.

Some of the reasons that you might put down as positives for weight loss are:

- I will be healthier.
- I will be able to try on new and nicer clothes.
- I will be able to move more easily.
- My breathing will improve.
- I will feel better.

Keep this piece of paper in a prominent place, i.e. you can put it to your refrigerator, or tape it on your bedroom mirror.

Not moving forward

Many people who are overweight have tried for years to lose weight. They try every diet that comes on the market, buy every book and yet over and over they gain the weight back. This can become a vicious cycle. Before you even start a new exercise or diet program you are setting yourself up to fail. You tell yourself that you are going to fail, but just to prove it you try the diet anyway. This is part of the reason that you fail.

Once you confront the reasons for being overweight, you should be able to move forward and start losing weight. Do not put yourself down just because you have failed in the past. A common reaction that people have is to give up at the first sign of failure and say to themselves: 'OK I failed, I might as well go back to my old ways'. So long as you eat healthily and start exercising you should be able to lose weight.

Weight loss is a slow and frustrating process. It may take months to lose only a few kilograms. It is therefore very important that you stick with your new lifestyle for the rest of your life. Just because you gain a kilogram in a week or you eat something that you are not supposed to eat is no reason for throwing the whole program away. As long as your overall trend is in the right direction you should just keep on going.

Failures in the past should not stop you from trying again now. Everyone fails, not just you. As long as you are clear about the reasons you have for being overweight in the first place, you should be able to lose weight. The benefits of losing weight should far outweigh the benefits of being overweight.

The powerful force of habit

We are all creatures of habit. Habits take years to develop and as we grow older they become more and more difficult to brake. Eating at certain times, what food we eat and how much we eat, are all partly due to habit. Habit is such a powerful force because it makes us feel comfortable. Everyday has its predictable set of habits. You keep within your comfort zone and anything that drives you outside of this comfort zone is very upsetting. Because it is uncomfortable doing something new, or changing your routines, you try to avoid it.

To be able to change your habits, you must consciously work hard on creating new ones. It is also very easy to fall back into your old habits and therefore it is very important to be very aware of what you are doing at all times.

For example, changing jobs can be very stressful, even if it is a better job and you are looking forward to it. You may still feel very apprehensive and even scared to take it. Going to a place that you have never been to before is also stressful. Every time you do something new or different, you try to look for familiar things that you can latch on to. Your eating patterns and food intake are examples of these familiar things that can give you a sense of comfort.

Changing anything is stressful. But you need to realise this beforehand and tell yourself that change is good. You need to recognise that any change in your life is going to be stressful even if it is for the better. You will have to buy different sorts of food, you will have to start exercising and you will have to change many of your daily routines. But even if these changes put you outside your comfort zone, you need to realise that they are changes for the better and you need to be persistent.

Keeping a diary

One of the great secrets of weight loss is keeping a diary. There are many reasons for this. Firstly, a lot of research has shown that overweight people under-report how much they have eaten. How often have you told yourself that: 'I never eat and yet I'm fat!' With a diary you can go back and see exactly what and how much you have eaten. By keeping a diary you can also see the kind of excuses that you use to eat.

Some of the common reasons for eating outside of your normal meals are:

- I was depressed so I ate some chocolate.

- I went out with my friend for a coffee.
- I was very hungry and couldn't resist eating outside of my normal meal times.
- I was baking some cookies for my family and had to taste the final result.

If you have a diary, you can go back and see when these things happen as well as how often and what the reasons for them happening are. If the same things keep happening over and over again, you have to start thinking about ways to stop them happening. These changes may include changing the time you have your meals, not going to certain places or even avoiding people who make you feel depressed.

For a diary to be of any use, you must keep it with you at all times. Every time something happens, you take out your diary and make some notes of what has happened. When you eat, note down how much you ate, when you ate and what your reason for eating was.

Your diary can also act as an outlet where you write about your feelings and impressions. Every night you should take out your diary and review what you have written down during the day. In this way you can follow your progress and see where you went wrong. Take a red pen and circle all the food that you ate outside of your mealtimes as this is the food that is making you fat among other things.

Your aim is to reduce this excess eating to nothing. Before you go to bed, think of ways to avoid making the same mistakes the next day. Do not give up; every mistake that you make is a learning experience that will make you a better and slimmer person in the future.

Visualisation techniques

Visualizing success is a technique that is very effective. This technique entails visualizing the body that you would like to have or the activity that you would like to be good at. This technique is very powerful and many successful people—from elite athletes to successful businessmen—use it to achieve their goals.

The technique is very simple and it has some similarities to meditation. Find a quiet room and a comfortable place to sit down. It doesn't matter where you sit as long as you are comfortable. Make sure that you are not going to be disturbed. Now try to imagine yourself the way you would like to be. Visualise your body as you would like it to look. What is your weight and what is your waist like, what do your legs look like? Try to get a clear image in your head. This visualization exercise will make your brain want to work towards this goal and you will have a mental picture of what your goal is.

Just having a goal of losing 10 kilograms (five pounds) is very abstract. But if you actually see yourself as you want to be, the visual image will assist you in losing the weight. You can also take this technique further and think of what you need to do to reach this goal. When you wake up in the morning you should spend five to 10 minutes visualizing the day ahead. Visualise only eating healthy food and doing your exercise during the day, visualise yourself walking or jogging faster and becoming more fit each day.

This technique is not only applicable to weight loss; it can be used for anything in life. Visualise being successful at an exam. Visualise going through a job interview and thinking of all the answers to the questions you are being asked. Visualise being confident.

Mood and weight loss

Mood is of great importance to your life and to weight loss. Some people are inherently negative and some are inherently positive. The positive people usually have a better life and better health. Being positive about yourself will also make it easier for you to lose weight. It is very difficult for pessimistic people to change their attitudes, as they tend to paint everything in a dark colour.

If you are a very negative person ask yourself: 'What am I getting out of being negative'. The answer should be nothing. The most common answer pessimistic people give is something like: 'When I expect something bad to happen, I'm usually right'. However, expecting the worst and being miserable 100 per cent of the time does you no good. So what if you are wrong?

To change your negative thinking, try challenging all the negative thoughts that you have. For example, if you think that you will never lose weight, you should challenge this: 'Why shouldn't I lose weight?' Just because you failed previously is no reason for failing now or in the future. If you change your lifestyle, you should be able to change your weight. Change the negative thought to a positive one such as: 'I will lose weight, it's only a matter of time!' If you are a happy, positive person you will also live longer and be more successful in your life.

Sometimes people experience deep mood swings caused by a chemical imbalance in their brain. Trying to think positively cannot easily change this. Major depression often lasts for a couple of months, in which time excess weight can accumulate dramatically. The time the depression lasts can be shortened by medical intervention. It is therefore important to go and see your doctor if you feel excessively down for a prolonged period of time.

Depression causes a lack of interest in life and so healthy eating and exercise are ignored. It also causes lack of energy, which further compounds the situation. If being large or having failed at a weight-loss program is caused by depression, it can become a vicious cycle. As you gain more weight, you become progressively more depressed, which causes you to gain more weight. The process being self-amplifying. At this stage it is important to have a very supportive family and friends and to seek medical attention to stop the depression in its tracks.

For more on the psychology of weight loss, please refer to my book, *Healthy Intentions: make it a habit*.