

## **Tips for long-term weight management**

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**Background.** Finding the best way to help our patients achieve and maintain the most healthy weight they can is not simple. There are many factors that can contribute to an individual exceeding his or her most healthy weight, including a complex mix of behavioural and biological variabilities.

**Objective.** This article explores some of the important strategies people need to employ to achieve and maintain the healthiest weight that is possible for them.

**Discussion.** Unfortunately, there is no standard advice for weight management. Rather, it is about helping each patient find a balance between the amount of energy consumed in food and drink and the amount of energy expended. We need to help our patients gather all the relevant information, and find the best way of assisting them to put that knowledge together. The best plan of action also involves helping our patients work on why they are having difficulty achieving and maintaining a healthy weight, having the right perspective, and helping them develop some new skills to achieve long-term change.

### **Motivation issues**

#### **Achievable, sustainable behavioural goals**

As with many areas of life, having the right goals is essential. If a patient is over their most healthy, comfortable weight and one of their goals is to lose weight, it is important to focus on individual and sustainable behavioural goals, and allow the change in weight to come as a result of the behaviour change. Jon Robison of the Michigan Center for Preventive Medicine recently wrote:

Weight loss is not a valid indicator of success, because it is not associated with long-term maintenance and because health benefits can be obtained through behaviour change independently of changes in weight.

Certainly evidence shows that it is healthy behaviour rather than the achievement of a certain weight on a chart that determines optimal health.

Taking the focus away from weight and weight loss may be very helpful. As one patient wrote:

Being overweight is often a symptom of problems rather than the cause. For me, seeing weight as a symptom has made it much easier to tackle. The fat is no longer the enemy. It

becomes part of your body again, a part that is telling you that something is not right. The reassociation with my physical self was very important. You stop fighting yourself. Like any armistice day, it was an incredible relief?

### **A positive attitude towards food**

In spite of popular culture there is no such thing as good food or bad food. People do need to know which foods are healthy but putting a moral tag on food, such as calling it 'junk' food, or 'good' food is of no benefit in developing a healthy eating pattern. So chocolate is not bad and apples are not good. Cake is not bad and capsicums are not good. We need to encourage people to look at all food as being 'morally neutral'. For most people, three chocolate bars a day would not be a healthy way of eating, but it still does not make having a chocolate bar bad, or make the chocolate bad itself. It also wouldn't make the person who ate the chocolate bad.

When people eat food they think of as 'bad', or 'junk', or 'rubbish', they can feel bad about themselves and guilty about what they have eaten. This makes the process of looking after themselves and developing a healthy eating pattern even harder. Often this guilt can make people eat more of that type of food, even when they no longer feel like it. It is important for people to know which foods are most healthy to eat, but calling a certain food 'good' or 'bad' is of no benefit to an appropriate nutritional understanding or education. For example, we can talk about food being 'everyday', healthy food, or high fat, high sugar food; or particularly for children, we could describe food as an 'everyday' food or 'sometimes' food. So, apples would be a healthy food, and chocolate would be a high fat or a sometimes food.

### **Non-hungry eating**

We can all eat food when we are not really feeling physically hungry. This sort of eating can be called non-hungry eating. Non-hungry eating can include things like overeating, grazing, picking, nibbling and bingeing. Non-hungry eating can occur at any time. It is quite normal to do some non-hungry eating, but when people do too much it can tip their eating out of balance.

Non-hungry eating is one of the most important factors to consider when working on why a particular person is having difficulty achieving and maintaining a comfortable weight. If people can decrease the amount of eating they do when they are not physically hungry they can enjoy a wide range of foods of different tastes, textures, fat and sugar content and still reach and maintain a healthy, comfortable weight.

### **Is it hunger?**

Over time, many people become unsure, or even forget, what being physically hungry really feels like. This is particularly so for people who have been on many diets. Most diets involve having a specific plan to follow, and actually tell the dieter not to listen to their body. It should come as no surprise then, that many people have either partly or even completely lost the ability to recognise when they are physically hungry. To become aware of the difference

between hungry and non-hungry eating, it is often very helpful for someone to check their hunger level before and after they eat using a simple hunger/fullness scale:

- 10 Stuffed full
- 8 Overfull
- 5 Full
- 2 Getting empty
- 0 Absolutely empty.

### **If I'm not hungry, why I am eating?**

After people become aware of the amount of their non-hungry eating, the next step is to try to understand why they might eat even though they are not physically hungry. For any one individual, the reasons may be many and varied. Some typical examples include:

- because the clock says it's lunch time
- because they are feeling tired or bored
- when they were children, their parents always said they had to finish off their plate.

Other reasons include emotions that are difficult to deal with. In this situation, non-hungry eating may well serve a very legitimate purpose, being used as a way of coping. Food is relatively cheap, it can be quick fix in the short term, and it is legal. So it is very easy to see how food can be used to deal with many situations and to meet many different needs. It is important people don't feel they need to exclude food as a way of dealing with certain situations, but it is certainly helpful to try to develop options other than food to deal with different situations that arise.

### **Being physically active**

The importance of being active cannot be stressed too highly. Unfortunately, the word 'exercise' for many people has been associated with the 'no pain, no gain' philosophy. In other words, that it has to hurt to be worthwhile. This is not true. Whatever physical activity a person can do is worthwhile.

### **Body image**

Even when someone feels their body is not at the most comfortable size and shape it can be, and even when they are working on a long term plan to change it, they need to try to be accepting of their body as they can be. A person might not like every part of their body, but it is important for them to try to come to terms with it. As Wilson explains: 'No conflict need exist between greater self-acceptance and efforts to make necessary dietary and exercise changes.'

There is no evidence that the former will undermine the latter'.

Changing body image involves both work and time. There are a number of exercises that help to stimulate self awareness and help improve body image, but two simple ones I've found effective are:

### **Up to five physical positives**

Over and over, when people are asked to list and describe five positive aspects about their body, they struggle to find one thing. They find it much easier to list negative things. Encourage people to take a moment to write down up to five positive things about their body.

### **My body's capabilities**

Discuss the positive behaviours that our body allows us to do. For example, legs for walking, eyes for seeing and ears for hearing. This might seem very basic, but it can highlight the remarkable things our body allows us to do that many of us simply take for granted.

### **Working with food**

On an individual level, many studies show that a key nutritional factor preventing people from achieving and maintaining a healthy weight is the fat content in the food and drink they consume. There are several reasons why the fat content plays such a significant role. Excess fat intake is very efficiently stored by the body as body fat. Fat doesn't fill us up very well. Fat tastes pleasurable and can be eaten quickly and high fat foods are readily available, convenient and very well marketed.

It is definitely healthy for people to consume some fat, and it is healthy for people to have some fat on their bodies. However, many people consume more fat than their bodies need. If we can help people find some ways of decreasing their overall fat intake, then they have lots of scope to consume a wide range of different foods and drinks and still achieve and maintain a comfortable healthy weight. It is also important to allow people to experiment to find out what suits them best. We might call this process fine tuning the fat content in food and drink without deprivation.

### **How do I fine-tune the fat content?**

Many people really enjoy having some butter or margarine on their toast in the morning. However it makes very little, or no difference at all, to the pleasure they get from their sandwiches at lunchtime whether they have butter, margarine or no spread at all. Having some spread on toast in the morning, but leaving the butter or margarine off the lunchtime sandwich is fine tuning the fat content in a non-deprivational way. It is a way of decreasing the fat content without hurting, without deprivation, and without measuring or counting.

## **Conclusion**

This article has provided a brief overview of a number of meaningful factors that can be relevant when a patient is trying to achieve and maintain a healthy weight. Others include interpersonal relationship issues, childhood issues with food, self-esteem and a person's ability to 'nurture' themselves.

### **Summary of Important Points**

Help patients to:

- focus on achievable, sustainable, behavioural goals
- look at all food as being 'morally neutral'
- don't confuse the thin 'ideal' message with health messages.