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## why diets don't work

I've decided to start the recovery portion of this book by discussing "Why Diets Don't Work". If my many years of practice have taught me anything, it's that the habit of dieting is at the root of most, if not all, dysfunctional eating. Moreover, it's a well-known fact that dieting is the major precursor to serious eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia nervosa, which are extremely dangerous and life threatening.

In this chapter, I will start by giving you some statistics and facts about dieting and why it's so dangerous. After that, I will share some of my thoughts based on my experience working with women with eating disorders about why it is we keep on dieting. We'll also talk about who is profiting most from this often highly injurious and destructive habit. Finally, I'll offer a detailed outline of what happens to us physiologically when we diet and how this sets up a self-perpetuating cycle of defeat.

In the second part of this chapter, I'm going to give you an opportunity, through some simple exercises, to delve into your own history of dieting, food obsession, weight loss and weight gain with the hope of opening your mind to some healthier alternatives to dieting. I chose to take this approach as a psychotherapist because I have found that true, lasting change only comes about when we do our own personal work. It's not enough to simply listen to someone else's story or to some expert, such as myself, pontificating on the dangers of dieting. We need to

take the advice and the knowledge received and apply them to our own experience. This can only be done once we've gone far enough below the surface to find the root causes of our problematic relationship to food and body image.

In a sense, I'm giving you the opportunity to do some of your own therapy right now, right here, within the pages of this book. You may find that you need outside help at certain points as these exercises may stir up a lot of emotions and recall memories of unfinished and unresolved business from your past. If this happens, I strongly suggest that you see a psychotherapist in person for individual sessions to help move you through these areas of difficulty and challenge.

For these hands-on exercises, you're welcome to use the pages of this book but you may need additional paper on which to record your answers. And, of course, you'll need a pen; possibly, a handful of pens. Even better, you could keep a journal dedicated to doing the exercises throughout this book so that you can keep track of your progress as you go along and have something to refer back to when needed.

I will also share with you a funny, inspirational story of a recovered dieter that you will, in all probability, be able to relate to and from which, I hope, you'll be able to gain some wisdom. Lastly, I will share some very practical and useful information about what "normal eating" looks like so that, immediately upon reading this first of our recovery chapters, you can start the process of transforming how you relate to food. I hope you find this experience informative, enlightening and helpful in your journey to finding peace with food and your body.

## a few dieting facts

- An astonishing 50% of young girls in Canada begin dieting before the age of nine; 81% of 10-year olds diet and at least 46% of 9 year olds restrict their eating.
- In the U.S., 7-17 year olds are the heaviest users of diet pills.
- 71% of adolescent girls want to be thinner despite the fact that only a small proportion of young girls are clinically overweight.
- The fear of fat is so overwhelming that young girls have indicated in surveys that they are more afraid of becoming fat than they are of cancer, nuclear war or losing their parents.

## proof that dieting leads to serious eating disorders

- 90% of those people diagnosed with an eating disorder are female.
- Eating disorders are now the third most common chronic illness in adolescent girls.
- Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness.
- While the most common age of onset is between 14 and 25 years of age, eating disorders can occur within a wide range of ages and are increasingly seen in children as young as 10 years of age.
- The death rate associated with anorexia nervosa alone is more than 12 times higher than the overall death rate among young women in the general population.
- It is estimated that a staggering 3% of women will be affected by eating disorders in their lifetime.

## what really happens when we diet?

How we diet	What really happens
By skipping meals or decreasing calories	Lowers metabolism so we store fat more easily from fewer calories  The brain's and muscle's demand for fuel causes rebound "munchies", usually for high fat and high sugar items  Poor attention span, irritability, fatigue  Muscle tissue may be lost
By eliminating starchy foods (i.e. Atkins Diet)	Your body loses its best source of stable energy, and you'll likely feel moody and tired  You'll end up eating higher fat and sugary foods to satisfy munchies

How we diet	What really happens
<p>By going on preplanned meal replacement diet or liquid diet</p>	<p>You have a 95% chance of regaining any weight you lose in 1-2 years</p> <p>You give away control to the plan which lowers your self-esteem</p> <p>You often lose muscle mass along with fat which lowers your metabolism, making it easier to store fat on fewer calories</p> <p>Habits are replaced temporarily, not changed permanently</p> <p>It's expensive! (In 1990, the diet industry posted an excess of \$32 BILLION. Imagine what it is now!)</p>
<p>By fasting</p>	<p>Most of weight loss is water</p> <p>Muscle mass decreases which lowers metabolism- leads to weight gain</p> <p>Can be medically dangerous for some</p>
<p>To be slim</p>	<p>Slimness is temporary. Over the long run, 95% of dieters regain the weight. Many women get fatter so they diet again with similar poor results. This is called diet cycling and can lead to obesity</p>

How we diet	What really happens
To be healthier	<p>Diet cycling increases health risks more than being overweight</p> <p>There is no evidence that being fat is unhealthy. There is evidence to show that being too thin is unhealthy</p> <p>Most dieting decreases our muscle mass. Muscles are needed for good health.</p> <p>Many diets are unhealthy. Your body and mind don't run well when you restrict calories. Dieting makes you cranky and obsessed with food. This feels like a failure, but is just a physiological response and has nothing at all to do with willpower</p>
To be more attractive	<p>What attracts you to someone else? Do you want your friends to like you for your body or who you are?</p> <p>What are long-term relationships based upon? If you are dieting, are you any fun to be around?</p>

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*Adapted from material provided by The British Columbia Ministry of Health and Ministry Responsible for Seniors.*

## top 10 reasons to give up dieting

1. Diets don't work. Even if you lose weight, you will probably gain it all back and you might gain back more than you lost.
2. Diets are expensive. If you didn't buy special diet products, you could save enough to get new clothes, which would improve your outlook and your appearance right now.
3. Diets are boring. People on diets talk and think about food and practically nothing else. There's a lot more to life than food.

4. Diets don't necessarily improve your health. Like weight loss, health improvement is temporary. Dieting can actually cause health problems.
5. Diets don't make you beautiful. Very few people will ever look like models. Glamour is a look not a size. You don't have to be thin to be attractive.
6. Diets are not sexy. If you want to be more attractive, take care of your body and your appearance. Feeling healthy makes you look your best.
7. Diets can turn into life-threatening eating disorders. The obsession to be thin can lead to anorexia, bulimia, bingeing and compulsive exercising.
8. Diets can make you afraid of food. Food nourishes and comforts us and gives us pleasure. Dieting can make food seem like your enemy and can deprive you of all the positives about food.
9. Diets can rob you of energy. If you want to live a full and active life, you need good nutrition and enough food to meet your body's needs.

*And the number one reason to give up dieting is...*

10. Learning to love and accept yourself just as you are will give you self-confidence, better health and a sense of well-being that will last a lifetime.

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*Adapted from the 1994 Council on Size and Weight Discrimination, Inc.*

Now that I've given you some information about dieting and why it's a complete waste of your time, energy and money, it's time to shift our focus to YOU. Let me begin by guiding you in doing some of the personal reflection that will help you to begin to let go of the dieting mentality permanently.

I am going to ask you three, apparently simple, questions to begin this process. Don't rip yourself off by writing the short, obvious answers to what may appear to be simple questions. I invite you to really meditate on each question and take as much time as you need to fully answer them.

Do some soul-searching and answer each question as thoroughly and honestly as you are able, particularly the last one. When you think you're done, dig a little deeper. Continue digging until you feel you've gotten to the bottom of things, until you're convinced you've told the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Remember: you're doing this for you and no one else. You owe it to yourself to spend time reflecting on this aspect of your life that has caused you so much grief.