

fat attitude

BY KERRIE ANN FREY

Most diets are born of a resentment of a particular body part. Some people jumpstart their diet because they can't fit into a particular pair of jeans and others because they aren't happy with their arms, thighs or another fill-in-the-blank aspect of their body. Often dieters push themselves to self-deprivation out of resentment and end up frustrated with a lack of results, despite seemingly unending lunge sets and hours logged on the treadmill.

According to a new Harvard study, it isn't what people are doing that keeps them from losing those extra pounds, it's what they aren't doing – thinking positively. The Harvard Mental Health Letter correlates negative thinking with weight gain or an inability to lose weight. Since the study was released, more scientific research has given credence to the theory, leading to the conclusion that with an attitude change can finally come a physical one.

The same study also proved that no matter how a person chooses to diet – Atkins, low-fat, extreme low calorie – the behavioral factors outweigh the macronutrient metabolism as the main weight loss controller. Translation: eat whatever you want on your diet, but unless you think positive thoughts and act on them, you will most likely gain the weight back.

It makes sense. Eat less than the body needs. Lose weight. Go back to the normal routine. Gain weight. Dieters often fail to learn to have a good

attitude towards the oppressive environmental factors that keep America fat. Super-size convenient meals, over-consumption-promoting businesses and products and sedentary jobs and lifestyles are the regular person's Kryptonite. Unless a person has a cape of psychological positivity, it's nearly impossible to resist comfort foods and the lure of the sofa over the treadmill.

So how do those looking to lose weight and get healthy find inner resilience despite years of negative self-talk and perpetual dieting? Small steps, surprisingly, and a willingness to be kind to yourselves.

THINK THE RIGHT THOUGHTS

Positive change never comes out of negative thinking, including weight loss. Michelle May, M.D. and author of *Am I Hungry? What To Do When Diets Don't Work* agrees. She says that because people constantly think of themselves as fat, it makes it difficult to stick to fat-loss-directed activities like exercise because they see themselves as out of place at the gym or walking at the park. "This attitude causes mental dissonance, and makes it more difficult for them to achieve their goals."

May explains that negative thinking leads to weight issues because thoughts lead to feelings, which lead to behaviors or actions, which lead to results. For example, a dieter thinks he is born to be fat; therefore, he

gets despondent. This resignation leads to depression, leading to overeating and avoiding the gym. The result? A perpetuation of the fat cycle. The negative thought pattern needs to stop to break the negative cycle.

Habitual thoughts become actual habits. Believing that you can't lose weight, are born to be fat, that you don't have control or don't have time to work out will manifest itself into reality. Try forming new thoughts that counteract the negative ones. Instead of insisting there isn't time, remember that 10 minutes in the morning, 10 minutes at lunchtime and 10 minutes before dinner is doable and will create results. Instead of getting frustrated with being unable to run on the treadmill, be grateful for being able to start out with a walk.

POWER UP THE WILLPOWER

Positive thought patterns involve the ability to exercise your bodies and your willpower. A lack of willpower is a common complaint among dieters. The expert's argument is that it can be self-taught or mimicked.

"Seek out behaviors in others that mirror how you would like to behave during emotional highs and lows," advises Amy Hendel, author of *Fat Families, Thin Families*. Hendel regularly sees her patients' willpower go out the window when emotional issues rear up. Eating as an emotional response is detrimental because the emotion eventually passes, but the additional weight is there to stay. By learning to deal with emotions without food, clients learn to be mindful. They will also be prepared with a healthy response to potentially disastrous triggers. Those healthy responses then become habits. There, again, is the connection between positive, habitual thinking and permanent weight loss.

Hendel offers the following responses that can be distracting to a lack of willpower: deep breathing, chewing gum, exercising, cleaning, knitting, playing an instrument or anything else that will keep your hands busy.

There is also the matter of bribery. Willpower can become stronger when there is a personal "treasure" at the end of a goal. For instance, it is easier to stick to a healthy meal plan when the promise of an island vacation looms ahead. Once the goal is attained, the joy of vacation is matched with pride at having beat emotional eating.

SMALL CHANGES YIELD BIG RESULTS

It is easier to think and act positively when faced with manageable goals or opportunities. If you decide on a whim one afternoon to get healthy and empty your pantry of all snacks, you're setting yourself up for failure. Those yearning for a healthier lifestyle can commit to forgoing just one item stopping them from achieving weight loss goals. New Orleans area counselor Gina Beck, L.C.S.W., suggests that people "Make one alteration and go from there. Replace Cheez-Its with cheese, but keep the Oreos for now. It's not so drastic. Try making your transformation with one item of food first."

ELIMINATE "DIET" – THE EVIL WORD

There is a difference between healthy restraint and plunging into a diet of manic calorie counting. Practicing restraint by one night skipping the sweet treat and allowing a bit of chocolate the next night is manageable. "Exercising healthy restraint means you stop when you're full – and that's a healthy habit. It does not necessarily mean vigilantly counting every single calorie you eat with utter dedication," reminds Amy Hendel.

That Harvard study proves that diets don't matter in the act of losing weight because most dieters gain the weight back. Why? Because diets don't address the negative thoughts and cycles of overeating, feeling guilty, starving and deprivation – all of which lead to overeating. When people "diet," they often get caught up in the restriction games, the alleged cheating and the drama that goes with self-deprivation.

Experts suggest taking the word "diet" to mean the habitual, perpetual eating pattern taken on for life, not just for the short-term. Think of "diet" as positive, healthy eating patterns and not the 8-week plan that involves weird cabbage soups "guaranteed to make you lose weight."

The combination of positive thinking, willpower building and diet reconstructing is the winner in the battle of self vs. self. Eliminating negative thoughts will allow dieters to think of themselves as people capable of healthy, lifelong habits. Achieving weight loss isn't about the food, it's about the thought. And that's positive food for thought! **HFM**

