WELLNESS MILESTONES

Diet and Exercise Motivation: Don’t Forget the Chocolate!

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Chocolate is a tasty morsel for mind and body! What does it have to do with your resolution to start that exercise program and healthy diet? Anyone with media access knows of the growing concerns among health professionals and health policy decision makers about the increasing number of overweight Americans. According to the Centers for Disease Control, 136 million adults and children are at greater risk for the long-term health consequences of obesity. Nurse anesthetists are not immune from this phenomenon. Indeed, informal surveys suggest that many CRNAs weigh at least 10 to 15 pounds more than they did 10 years ago.

In spite of good intentions and initial resolve, enthusiasm for exercise tends to fade come Valentine’s Day, when you realize that losing weight is a lifetime goal and not something you can accomplish in a few weeks. Experts agree: If you really want to lose weight, you may need to change your attitude. The wrong attitude can set you up for failure: You begin to look at exercise as punishment—a painful, time-consuming, unsustainable obligation. Dieting also requires discipline. It is boring, fraught with cravings, and difficult to fit into your schedule.

Losing weight requires a major commitment. Changing diet and exercise levels can be physically and mentally exhausting, especially if you severely modify your lifestyle. Further, experts agree that no matter how effective your plan may be or how physically prepared you are, your efforts are doomed if your mind isn’t in the game.

Weight management programs generally follow the same scientific recommendations: Eat fewer calories, expend more calories through exercise, and those billions of fat cells will begin to shrink. However, as with any lifestyle change, your mind can give you a major advantage. Behavioral experts have noted that people who set achievable benchmarks and factor in a reward system have better outcomes. Treating yourself when you achieve even the smallest improvements toward a healthier lifestyle or any other goal contributes to overall success. That brings us back to chocolate and maybe, just maybe, enjoying without guilt.

About Chocolate

Research suggests that chocolate, with its 300 chemical components including caffeine, theobromine, and phenylethylamine, can be beneficial and help keep blood flowing throughout the body. Scientists do not always agree on how chocolate boosts cardiovascular fitness, nor do they recommend it as a tool for disease prevention, but it’s clear that a little isn’t all that bad. More importantly, if you feel deprived, a little chocolate can motivate you to stick to your plan.

Currently in healthcare there is much discussion on how to improve our health and well-being through the influences of the mind, body, and spirit. It is generally accepted that chocolate tends to soothe and comfort, creating good feelings. Chocolate may even help combat depression, possibly because it contains phenylethylamine (PEA), a mild mood enhancer.

Dark chocolate is a rich source of flavonoids (antioxidants found in plants), thought to possess cardioprotective properties. It has significant antioxidant actions much like green tea, protecting against LDL (“bad” cholesterol) oxidation. Other studies have associated chocolate with a small reduction in blood pressure and platelet coagulation in the elderly and suggest that it may reduce the risk of cancer. Certainly more research is needed and there is no established recommended daily allowance of chocolate to promote healthy hearts. But for now, eating a little chocolate may have positive effects on your health, i.e., keeping your blood vessels relaxed, thus reducing blood pressure and improving circulation.

Not all chocolate is equal: Be careful to choose the right kind. No health benefits have been associated with milk chocolate and white chocolate. Remember, it is not the chocolate; it’s the fat and calories added by other ingredients (chewy caramel marshmallow nut covered) that add the pounds.

Overcoming Obstacles to Exercise

Inadequate time management and lack of motivation increase stress and can derail a diet and exercise program. No one argues diet and exercise can be difficult when trying to balance work, relationships, family, and everyday activities. It is therefore crucial to maintain goal honesty and specificity as well as motivation. Allow yourself ample time, and factor in those very important rewards if you are to achieve success.

Nobody wants to do something painful, boring, or obligatory. So, before you throw yourself into weight loss, assess your attitude and keep the following in mind:

1. Willpower is for short-term success. Long-term success requires planning, discipline, and finding ways to motivate yourself every day.
2. Motivation will not magically happen. What motivates you will change from day to day. You have to recommit to your goals each day, tweak them to fit changes in your lifestyle and attitude, and find new ways to motivate yourself.
3. You will not always want to exercise and eat healthy foods. Even the most committed exerciser doesn’t always want to do it. Know that you will have to work on it every day.

Don’t Forget the Chocolate!
4. Don’t give up just because you gained a pound or missed a day of exercise. Everyone has ups and downs. In fact you should expect to falter every now and then. Do not use giving in to temptation as an excuse for abandoning the whole program.

Make your exercise program non-negotiable. For example, if you debate with yourself at 5:30 a.m. whether you feel like getting up to exercise, you will probably stay in bed for another half hour. But if getting up for exercise is non-negotiable—like getting up for work—you will do it regardless of your feelings.

If you are using the “too busy card” as an excuse, try working out at the same time each day. Building habits affects your mental attitude and influences your ability to do everything else. Too tired? Try changing your schedule to accommodate your exercise program, particularly since energy and strength are generally higher in the morning. Eat a healthy snack before exercising, no matter what time of day. Increased energy helps to boost productivity throughout your daily activities. Boredom can be lightened by changing the routine to different music, different types of activities, or working out with friends. If you continue to experience a lack of interest and motivation, figure out why. Did you set realistic achievable expectations? Finally, don’t be self-critical; it makes it too easy to give up.

A little goes a long way toward improving your well-being. Building strength and stamina with exercise just two to three times per week can help you perform both extraordinary and ordinary physical tasks without straining. Muscle strength helps support your posture, which reduces fatigue, back pain, and other body aches. Studies indicate that just six months of moderate physical activity may help turn back the clock as much as 30 years. Even stretching offers some benefits. Fifteen seconds is better than five, though five is still better than nothing when it comes to improving flexibility. Stretching can also provide instant tension relief. Get a new point of view and look at exercise as a break from a stressful workday—a way to boost energy and mood. Your workout may be the only time you’ll have to yourself all day; try to think of it as a chance to reward yourself and improve your quality of life.

Nothing is particularly hard if you divide it into small jobs.

Henry Ford (1863-1947)

A healthy diet and a regular fitness regimen can reduce stress. The critical step in successful dieting is to identify your diet challenges. If your diet seems like torture, if the food gives you no pleasure, if you’re making yourself and everyone around you miserable, then you’ll have trouble losing all the weight you want or in keeping it off.

Your diet should meet your needs and wants and fit into your lifestyle. The diet should not control you! Strict rules just increase your chance of failure and raise stress levels. Experts suggest that you customize a diet to meet your needs. Research also indicates that the more successful weight loss programs work because of support groups, options in food selection, and a way to reward your efforts. Of course, before starting any weight loss program, you should see your doctor to make sure your diet is right for you. You can also check out the REAL AGE assessment tool on www.aana.com/wellness.aspx to learn about the areas of your diet you most need to improve.

Permanent weight loss means permanent change. Fortunately food and beverage manufacturers are introducing healthier products. Nutritionists, dieticians, and other health professional agree that healthy eating requires awareness of your daily calories. A successful plan must be flexible enough to fit most lifestyles and can accommodate your personal preferences. The USDA general recommendations are well known: Eat high-fiber, whole grain foods instead of white bread, potatoes, sugar, and pasta. Make sure to eat enough protein, which helps stave off hunger, and lots of water-filled fruits and vegetables, which will make you feel full. And, don’t eliminate all fats: Remember, fats found in chocolate, nuts, avocados, olives, and fish may protect against heart disease.

Changing ingrained habits is never easy and almost never convenient. But if you begin now rather than later, you’ll have a jump on a more satisfying future. A bit of chocolate might be the rewarding factor that helps you succeed.

Resources

Taubert D, Berkels R, Klaus W. Chocolate and blood pressure in elderly individuals with isolated systolic hypertension. JAMA. 2003. 8:290, 1029-1030.

www.acefitness.org Accessed 12/1/06.