September Redux: Getting Back on Track for the Rest of the Year

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You remember that New Year’s resolution? Eat less, exercise more! September seems a perfect time to revisit your goals. At summer’s end, we change our schedules, wardrobes, and put away the snorkeling gear. The season shifts into autumn, the leaves change color, and the temperature cools.

When we first decide to make positive changes in our lives, especially diet and fitness, we usually underestimate the time and effort it will take. It’s easy to set a goal, but we often forget to make a sustainable plan and to take a focused action. It takes a lot of mental and physical energy to change habits. And it takes patience, usually where most of us fall short.

Caught up in the routine of our busy lives, many of us suffer from an unbalanced relationship with food, enhanced by the stress of a non-stop, 24/7 culture.

For thousands of years, the population body weight stayed fairly stable. In the 1980s it began to change, and by the 1990s the number of overweight people spiked dramatically. National obesity statistics show a 49 percent increase in obesity rates since 1991. An estimated 22 million children under age five are estimated to be overweight worldwide. According to the report, obesity causes an estimated 280,000 deaths annually and diseases associated with overweight account for 6.8 percent of U.S. healthcare costs.

Body weight depends on a multitude of factors. Both lifestyle and genetics play critical roles. We work long hours and spend much of our time in traffic or flying on airplanes. Fast food likely contributes to overconsumption, and a sedentary lifestyle reduces energy expenditure. Studies show that chronic stress and high cortisol levels can contribute to weight gain. A decrease in rapid eye movement (REM) sleep could also lead to increased weight in circumstances associated with shortened sleep, such as shift work, travel, and other life-work choices.

Although we all understand the consequences and most of us try to change, old habits creep in and we keep sabotaging ourselves.

The Trap of Emotional Eating

It happens to everyone. Most of the time, we control our food intake. We select vegetables and fruits with a high nutritional value. We take care to consume sufficient amounts of lean protein and fiber. Then we get stressed or depressed, physically and mentally tired, or just bored and head straight for those comfort foods: chocolate, greasy fast-food, or Mom’s lasagna.

Scientists refer to this phenomenon as emotional eating. Individuals who normally restrain their food intake seem to lose self-discipline when faced with stressors that seem beyond their control. They fall back into old habits and make unhealthy food choices.

Research shows that food consumption alters our moods, emotional predisposition, and increases positive affect, typically reducing irritability and increasing calmness. Although there is short-term gratification and temporary relief from negative emotions, several studies have shown that over time, stress-related endocrine changes and aberrant coping behaviors can lead to weight gain.

The sensory, physiological, and psychological mechanisms that underlie emotional eating are cued to taste and smell. Sensory cues to sweet, high-energy foods can improve mood and mitigate effects of stress, primarily through the brain opioidergic and dopaminergic neurotransmission. Some sweet, fatty foods low in protein may also reduce stress through an enhanced function of the serotonergic system. These foods seem to act as part of a feedback loop, via release of glucocorticoid hormones and insulin which limits the activity of the hypothalamic pituitary adrenal axis during stress. This effect is often associated with abdominal obesity.

We all need to eat; it is basic to life. The key to weight control is balancing energy intake with energy expenditure. Unfortunately, many environmental factors such as lifestyle, work schedule, and eating environment affect our food consumption without us even realizing it.

Food isn’t used just to satisfy hunger, it is also a common part of social interactions and a means of comfort and stress relief. We eat because we are bored, busy, or angry. We eat because we feel hopeless, things are out of control, and we believe nothing will ever change. We eat because everyone else around us is eating. We eat when something good happens. We tend to eat more when times are bad.

Mindfulness and Weight Control

Even those who are careful about what they eat can be unaware of what they eat throughout the day. We nibble and taste while preparing a meal. Eating while multitasking often leads us to eat more. We all fall prey to eating mindlessly.

We also tend to eat mindlessly if we perceive the food as healthy. The concept of the “Halo Effect” is that packaging that makes health claims about food items (or brands, restaurants, etc) often results in people eating more total calories, and more unhealthy foods, than they otherwise might.

The word mindful is synonymous with paying attention or taking care, and research shows that mindful eating can be a powerful tool. Self-awareness, self-monitoring, self-control, and self-care are the keys that can enhance our ability to lose weight and give us the strength to put ourselves first.

Mindfulness is staying present and aware of what we do. However,
in this fast-paced world we have difficulty staying in the moment. Especially when eating. We gulp down a sandwich in the car or edit a paper at our desks while inhaling vendor food. What we put in our body becomes a matter of convenience and automatic action, a habit. Then we worry about how to maintain a regular exercise program or stay away from fried foods. Often, when we lapse or make a bad choice, we decide we are doomed to failure and give up.

Habits are routines of behavior that are repeated regularly and tend to occur subconsciously. Take a close look at your routines. Examine what is working for you and what is not. It takes about 21 days to change your habits. Once these habits have set in, they need to be reinforced for a period of time to create a deep groove within your subconscious mind. Positive habits, such as self-discipline, self-control, order, and perseverance, all require a conscious effort to create and maintain. It’s very much easier to sustain a negative habit than a positive habit, and our habits can make or break us.

High levels of motivation have been considered a critical necessity for behavioral change programs, such as weight loss programs. Research correlational studies show that high self-esteem individuals are more likely to participate in exercise. There is clear evidence that a behavioral component to conventional weight management programs improves outcomes.3

The Importance of Exercise
The amount of physical activity needed to prevent long-term weight gain is unclear. However, we do know that exercise tames cravings, improves memory, and makes you happy. Working out stimulates dopamine, serotonin, and norepinephrine, the brain chemicals usually associated with depression. Physical activity improves circulation, energy, and sleep. Exercise reduces the risk of breast cancer for women by 40 percent, and for men, the risk of prostate cancer decreases by 10 percent to 30 percent.

Health and fitness experts recommend starting by taking small, even tiny steps. Start small and practice daily. Recognize and acknowledge each little success as it comes along. As one success leads to another, they add up, and you gain confidence in your ability to reach even larger goals.

The best exercise is the one that you enjoy. Trying to do too much often leads to doing nothing, so start with small efforts. Build your routine around how it feels to move your body. When it becomes more than an exercise, it can transform into a hobby, a social event, or a team sport. Just get active and feel the difference. If you focus on how you feel from working out, rather than the calorie burning effect of exercise, it can make the difference between rolling out of bed for a brisk morning walk and hitting the snooze alarm.

It is important that we re-examine our mindset and redefine exercise. It is not just a hard and boring activity. If making these lifestyle changes is daunting as it was in January, break them down into small steps rather than taking the huge leap. Many of those who do take it as a big leap are more likely to revert back to their old ways than those who break it down. Form a simple plan to turn small changes into habits. Stick with the plan and modify in small steps to adjust and maintain interest.

Getting fit and leading a healthy lifestyle is a long-term investment with long-term reward such as improved health. Get in the habit of thinking in baby steps and celebrating each victory along the way. No matter how small the steps may seem, every step leads us closer to those resolutions that we made in January.

Resources


