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## [A Guide to Behavior Change: Your Weight is Important](#)

### **Your Weight Is Important**

Over the past few years it has become clear that weight is an important health issue. Some people who need to lose weight for their health don't recognize it, while others who don't need to lose weight want to get thinner for cosmetic reasons. We understand that in some ways your weight is different from, for example, your cholesterol level or your blood pressure, because you can't see what these are by looking at someone. Many patients have had health care providers who approached their weight in a less-than-sensitive or helpful manner. Some patients may have had health care encounters in which they felt blamed, but not helped. Successful weight management is a long-term challenge.

Weight can affect a person's self-esteem. Excess weight is highly visible and evokes some powerful reactions, however unfairly, from other people and from the people who carry the excess weight. The amount of weight loss needed to improve your health may be much less than you wish to lose, when you consider how you evaluate your weight. Research has shown that your health can be greatly improved by a loss of 5-10 percent of your starting weight. That doesn't mean you have to stop there, but it does mean that an initial goal of losing 5-10 percent of your starting weight is both realistic and valuable.

### **Behaviors That Will Help You Lose Weight and Maintain It**

#### **Set the Right Goals**

Setting the right goals is an important first step. Most people trying to lose weight focus on just that one goal: weight loss. However, the most productive areas to focus on are the dietary and physical activity changes that will lead to long-term weight change. Successful weight managers are those who select two or three goals at a time that are manageable.

Useful goals should be **(1) specific; (2) attainable (doable); and (3) forgiving (less than perfect)**. "Exercise more" is a great goal, but it's not specific. "Walk 5 miles every day" is specific and measurable, but is it doable if you're just starting out? "Walk 30 minutes every day" is more attainable, but what happens if you're held up at work one day and there's a thunderstorm during your walking time another day? "Walk 30 minutes, 5 days each week" is specific, doable, and forgiving. In short, a great goal!

### **Nothing Succeeds Like Success**

Shaping is a behavioral technique in which you select a series of short-term goals that get closer and closer to the ultimate goal (e.g., an initial reduction of fat intake from 40 percent of calories to 35 percent of calories, and later to 30 percent). It is based on the concept that "nothing succeeds like success." Shaping uses two important behavioral principles: (1) consecutive goals that move you ahead in small steps are the best way to reach a distant point; and (2) consecutive rewards keep the overall effort invigorated.

### **Reward Success (But Not With Food)**

An effective reward is something that is desirable, timely, and dependent on meeting your goal. The rewards you choose may be material (e.g., a movie or music CD, or a payment toward buying a more costly item) or an act of self-kindness (e.g., an afternoon off from work or just an hour of quiet time away from family). Frequent small rewards, earned for meeting smaller goals, are more effective than bigger rewards that require a long, difficult effort.

### **Balance Your Food Checkbook**

"Self-monitoring" refers to observing and recording some aspect of your behavior, such as calorie intake, servings of fruits and vegetables, amount of physical activity, etc., or an outcome of these behaviors, such as weight. Self-monitoring of a behavior can be used at times when you're not sure how you're doing, and at times when you want the behavior to improve. Self-monitoring of a behavior usually moves you closer to the desired direction and can produce "real-time" records for review by you and your health care provider. For example, keeping a record of your physical activity can let you and your provider know quickly how you're doing. When the

record shows that your activity is increasing, you'll be encouraged to keep it up. Some patients find that specific self-monitoring forms make it easier, while others prefer to use their own recording system.

While you may or may not wish to weigh yourself frequently while losing weight, regular monitoring of your weight will be essential to help you maintain your lower weight. When keeping a record of your weight, a graph may be more informative than a list of your weights. When weighing yourself and keeping a weight graph or table, however, remember that one day's diet and exercise patterns won't have a measurable effect on your weight the next day. Today's weight is not a true measure of how well you followed your program yesterday, because your body's water weight will change from day to day, and water changes are often the result of things that have nothing to do with your weight-management efforts.

### **Avoid a Chain Reaction**

Stimulus (cue) control involves learning what social or environmental cues seem to encourage undesired eating, and then changing those cues. For example, you may learn from reflection or from self-monitoring records that you're more likely to overeat while watching television, or whenever treats are on display by the office coffee pot, or when around a certain friend. You might then try to change the situation, such as by separating the association of eating from the cue (don't eat while watching television), avoiding or eliminating the cue (leave the coffee room immediately after pouring coffee), or changing the circumstances surrounding the cue (plan to meet your friend in a nonfood setting). In general, visible and reachable food items are often cues for unplanned eating.

### **Get the Fullness Message**

Changing the way you go about eating can make it easier to eat less without feeling deprived. It takes 15 or more minutes for your brain to get the message that you've been fed. Eating slowly will help you feel satisfied. Eating lots of vegetables and fruits can make you feel fuller. Another trick is to use smaller plates so that moderate portions do not appear too small. Changing your eating schedule, or setting one, can be helpful, especially if you tend to skip, or delay, meals and overeat later.

National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute

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