

# Using Psychology to Lose Weight

Because Dieting and Exercise Alone Don't Work

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*from*



The website for women who want to lose weight  
and keep the weight off permanently

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## Introduction

The reason so many women fail to lose unwanted weight is because they are relying too much on a diet or weight loss program to do the heavy lifting. The issues involved in losing weight are broader than what diets and weight loss programs offer. It is never just about the food. The food is only part of the process. The woman who wants to shed her extra pounds must also change certain patterns of behavior so she doesn't have to fight against herself when she's trying to reduce her weight.

Take a look at the familiar formula:  $\text{Weight Loss} = \text{Diet} + \text{Exercise}$ .

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This paper takes the position that because of the continuing high rate of weight loss failure with the current standard formula,  $\text{Diet} + \text{Exercise} = \text{Weight Loss}$ , a new formula for weight loss is needed. It argues that losing weight, especially for women, is never just about food. It is always about a woman's psychology as well. Adherence to a weight loss regimen and personal change are psychological matters that must be addressed by using psychology to lose weight.

Dieting and weight loss as they are currently practiced with diet and exercise alone are not only insufficient, but they require too much self-control and willpower. The use of so much self-control and willpower has made the weight loss process terribly arduous and ripe for failure. So in addition to the primary goal of losing unwanted weight, there needs to be the equally important goal of using the least possible amount of self-control and willpower to effect change.

With the goal of making the weight loss process much less dependent on willpower and self-control, the paper then points out how to implement this goal. It takes traditional weight loss issues and, using the principles and practices of psychology, illustrates how to successfully resolve these issues more automatically, and without the need for such taxing and self-defeating effort.

There are actually two critical factors missing from this equation—call them X and Y. Factor X is adherence to the weight loss regimen and factor Y is personal change.

The corrected equation reads: Weight Loss = Diet + Exercise + Adherence + Personal Change.

## **The X and Y factors**

### **Adherence**

Adherence to a diet or to some type of weight loss regimen is perhaps the most problematic aspect for people trying to lose weight. Just take a look at the statistics — 62 percent of women in the United States age 20 to 74 are overweight or obese. But on any given day 45 percent of women in the United States are trying to lose weight.

Sticking to a weight loss program or diet requires you to stay motivated and committed, do what the diet or weight loss regimen calls for, and do it repeatedly and continuously until you reach your goal weight. This is the X factor.

### **Personal change**

Personal change, the Y factor, requires you to alter well-established patterns of behavior that contributed to and caused you to eat so that you gained unwanted weight. These patterns are also keeping you overweight, and they are keeping you from losing your unwanted weight as well.

Psychological research shows that breaking the patterns of behavior leading to weight-maintaining habits like overeating or eating too many fattening, weight-gaining and weight-maintaining foods, calls for a process of personal change.

Personal change, or the Y factor, is actually made up of  $Y_1$  and  $Y_2$ , where

- $Y_1$  = changing well-established patterns that prevent successful dieting and weight loss
- $Y_2$  = establishing new patterns conducive to successful dieting and weight loss.

The X and Y factors are the psychological parts of losing weight. They constitute the nonfood plan for weight loss. The nonfood plan involves ways to deal with all the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and automatic habits you developed that fight against you when you try to go on and stay on a diet or weight loss regimen. The nonfood plan is about using psychology for making personal changes so you can adhere, reach your weight loss goal, and stay there. Adherence is not only sticking to your food plan, it is also sticking to what will help you make the necessary personal changes in order to lose weight.

## Premise

1. The most important fact about women and losing weight is it is never just about food.

## Primarily psychological (not physical)

Here are some common snapshots that show the psychological aspects of dieting and weight loss. “I have to have the *right attitude* to diet.” “I’m not *ready* to lose weight at this time.” “I *don’t like* my weight and the way I look.” I’ve *tried* to lose weight and *it’s no use*.” “I *can’t stand myself* when I blow my diet.” The key psychological issues in these snapshots are: right attitude, not ready, don’t like, tried, no use, can’t stand myself

To make the point even more indelibly, here are a number of examples of the influence of psychology on every person's weight loss journey.

- What motivates you
- What prevents you from succeeding
- What causes you to fail
- How and why you learn
- Setting goals, implementing them, and reaching them
- Who you are as a person and what that has to do with losing weight
  - Your personality
  - Your defenses
  - Your openness
  - Your closed-mindedness
  - Your personal history
- What you do with self-perception
- The social comparisons you make
- How and what you think, and believe
- How you go about monitoring yourself and using the feedback
- What personal conflicts you are facing
- What your feelings do
- Habits
- Patterns of behavior

Using psychology to lose weight means **getting yourself to do it**—do what it takes to lose your unwanted weight: Getting yourself to START, STICK TO IT, and then KEEP IT OFF for good. Using psychology to lose weight includes **solving problems** too. You've got to solve those problems that prevent you from losing weight—not enough willpower, hard-to-break habits, emotional eating, and any other personal weight loss spoilers. These problems are the obstacles you have to face and master if you want to lose unwanted weight and keep the weight off permanently.

## Premise

2. Successful weight loss is mostly psychological. If diet and exercise make up only a small part of the weight loss process, you won't have what you need to lose weight if you rely on diet and exercise alone.

## Maintaining

The secret to permanent weight loss is wrapped up in the concept of maintaining. Maintaining is the end phase in dieting and weight loss, when a person has reached her goal weight and then *maintains* her goal weight.

At first, maintaining a weight loss is something the maintainer has to work at. The principles used for keeping weight off are different from those involved in dieting to lose weight. The new patterns of eating learned through dieting have to be used in the maintaining phase without the boundaries of the diet. This freedom in eating is a new challenge.

The goal is to make your new eating patterns so firmly established that they happen automatically, without you having to think to do them. Getting these new eating patterns to work more automatically for you makes it so you don't have to feel challenged day in and day out. This doesn't mean that you don't now and then have to rise to the occasion, face feeling challenged once again, and have to work at maintaining your weight. But you should be able to say, I can now eat whatever I want and not gain weight—because, you've changed your eating pattern so what you want fits right in with good weight management and good weight control.

### Premise

**3. The ultimate goal after you lose weight and keep it off permanently is to eat anything you want. That is because what you want has changed.**

There are, however, two kinds of maintaining when it comes to weight. One is where you lose your unwanted weight and then maintain the weight you lost. The other is maintaining your unwanted weight right where it is—staying overweight.

Overeating, eating too many fattening foods, and binge eating are the usual causes of gaining and then maintaining too much weight. Instead of maintaining weight loss you maintain your weight gain, and you are maintaining all your old “moves” as well. When you are maintaining the weight you have gained, you are making “moves” with food for nonfood purposes. Mood control and emotional relief have become a pretty automatic reaction. You turn to food out of habit. Most likely, this habit pattern is an integral part of your daily life.

The secret to losing weight and keeping it off permanently is to go from one kind of maintaining, where you use food for nonfood purposes and are maintaining your old habits and your additional weight, to the other kind of maintaining, where you are maintaining your weight loss. You get there by using better ways to cope with the nonfood issues, and thereby work yourself into a new pattern of eating.

It is not possible to jump the divide between one form of maintaining—those old habits of overeating and weight gain—to the new form of maintaining—normal eating and healthy body weight. If a jump like this were possible, it would mean you would be eliminating all of the weight loss work in between. Breaking the old habit patterns, learning new ways, and making these new ways the new habit pattern is the route you have to take. There is no other.

If there is so much psychology involved in weight loss and you don't use it, you are making the task of losing unwanted weight much harder for yourself than you need to. Using psychology to lose weight makes the weight loss process not such hard work. Reducing the effort it takes to lose unwanted weight is why the X and Y factors need to be added to the formula,  $\text{Weight Loss} = \text{Diet} + \text{Exercise} + X (\text{Adherence}) + Y (\text{Personal Change})$ .

## Self-control

Dieting and weight loss as they are currently practiced require a lot of self-control. Self-control for most people brings up the idea of having to use a lot of willpower. Here's what people usually mean by willpower.

- Being able to resist
- Something that's too hard unless you exert more than the usual effort
- Exercising self-control
- Saying "no"
- Resisting temptation
- Effortful control
- Self-denial
- Being able to stick to it
- When you don't have the motivation, you can still use your willpower
- Putting off gratifying yourself
- Having strength of mind
- Sticking with your long-term goal
- Keeping your focus

Willpower is a tricky business though. Sometimes you can't find it when you need it, you can run out of it after using it for too long, and what looks like willpower may not be willpower at all. If it looks like willpower, but it is not willpower, what is it? (Could it be skill-power?)

- If you manage the situation by becoming playful, or think of it factually rather than emotionally, or you distract yourself, are you then using your willpower?
- What about planning? If you planned for a high-risk situation like eating out, then you probably wouldn't think you were dealing with the situation by using your willpower.
- Willpower, or what looks like willpower, can be built by focusing on short-term goals, having lots of success with them, becoming more confident, thereby giving you what you need to tackle harder goals later on.
- You can work hard and well on short-term goals, making it look like you are using willpower. But you are actually seeing the connection between short-term goals and longer-term goals, and it is this connection that is keeping you at it.

When it comes to the traditional conception of weight loss—diet and exercise—self-control is used to refer to the restraint the eater has to exercise regarding the

amount, kind, and frequency of eating. If dieting and losing weight are primarily psychological, then trying to regulate food intake alone will be a stressful, self-defeating process.

What if using psychology to lose weight meant that you did not have to use so much self-control when it came to eating and food? In other words, you wouldn't have to make losing your unwanted weight such an exercise in willpower and self-control.

Since the use of so much willpower and self-control makes the weight loss process terribly arduous and ripe for failure, it is crucial that something be done about this. What if we added another equally important goal to the primary goal of losing your unwanted weight? We could say, in this regard, that just as primary a goal as losing weight and keeping the weight off for good would be using the least possible amount of self-control and willpower to effect this change. So an additional premise would be the following:

## **Premise**

4. A primary goal of the weight loss process would be to go from maintaining a state of being overweight to maintaining your goal weight by having to use the least possible amount of self-control and willpower.

## **Automatic**

Overeating and the use of food for nonfood purposes like mood control and emotional relief over time become part of a person's everyday repertoire, part of who the person is. Reaching for extras, seconds, chips, cookies, eating too much so you make your stomach feel a certain way, all become second nature. These "moves" like the "moves" of any behavior that has become habitual have been well rehearsed, and they become automatic. But it's not only the "moves" that become automatic. It's also the "I can't help it" reactions to various cues that

become automatic as well. Some well-known external cues are social events and stressful situations. Some well-known internal cues are anxieties and negative feelings.

On the positive side, operating automatically is essential to success in your life. You need to do things with ease and certainty, not expend a lot of mental energy, not be too taxed by what you do. You have mental energy then for more important things. This is how it should be. Automatic means not having to be aware of each of the moves you make.

On the negative side, not having to be conscious of your actions and your thoughts is what you have done to yourself if you are overweight. You established automatic patterns, habits that control your “moves” and keep you overeating, eating those fattening foods, and keep you overweight. They prevent you from successfully dieting and losing weight, even when you consciously want to shed a lot of pounds.

It is best to lose weight as automatically as possible. This means with the least amount of effort. That is what you should shoot for. Put being as automatic and effortless as possible right up there with your actual weight loss goal. Experiencing weight loss as being too much of an effort for you is one of the biggest obstacles to you having good weight loss success.

The automaticity, which is what enables you the self-changer to be the most successful in your efforts, comes from mental activity that is highly compatible with who you are right now and what you have to bring to the weight loss process. It is the kind of mental activity that requires little use of willpower. The mental activity feels automatic, but it need not be totally automatic and out of awareness. There can be some awareness of your thought process, even if you only become aware afterwards.

Automaticity is a primary goal, right up there with the goal of losing weight. You get to automatic by feeling increasingly more comfortable with yourself and what you are attempting to accomplish. This leaves you with plenty of mental energy, since you do not have to control yourself as much. You want to flow, as much as you can. Minimize the feeling of having to make a big effort. The feeling of being who you are in the moment should be comfortable for you as you work away at losing your unwanted weight. You become automatic, at least to the extent that you are comfortable relying on who you are in these moments of reduced effort.

You can expect personal change to disrupt your smooth, comfortable, automatic functioning. It always does. To re-enable automaticity you must keep minimizing the disruptions involved in making your personal changes. The way to do this is to have you the changer disrupt your flow using the least willpower possible. Anything higher will call for the expenditure of self-regulatory energy experienced as a comparatively greater effort and not at all automatic.

## **Using psychology**

Here are some of the methods at the heart of using psychology to lose weight that will get you from the one kind of maintenance to the other kind of maintenance more automatically, and without having to resort to so much willpower and self-control. The methods are in no particular order. They are set out here to illustrate how you can go about using psychology to make the process of weight loss a whole lot less effortful, and turn out to be more successful.

### **Goals and plans**

#### **Sub-goals**

Lots of small goals along the way to the long-term goal give lots of chances for success. Success leads to further success. Actually success also leads to the

construction of more sub-goals with which you can have even more success. Sub-goals and success are intertwined, each being necessary for the other.

## **Success**

Having success means reaching your goals and sub-goals as much as possible. The more you reach your goals the more successful you feel. The goals have to be realistic though. They cannot be meaningless or be way below your level of challenge. Neither can they be unrealistic in the sense that they are too out of your reach. Wise goal setting is called for when you're reaching for success.

Success can be measured objectively as in reaching some tangible goal. But it can also be measured subjectively by achieving something more personal, something on the inside. Subjective success can itself be tangible, especially when you are the one experiencing it. Your thoughts and feelings can be quite real and substantial. A goal of not being so blind about yourself and your foibles is as good a success once you reach it as not taking that extra helping of food.

## **Learning and performance goals**

If you set your goal at *learning* how to do something rather than setting a goal of *performing well* at it, you are entering into a very different psychological process. A learning goal lets you off the hook of having the ability already there inside you ready to use. When you set a learning goal, you are telling yourself that it is all right that you do not have the ability ready and waiting, and that you will be gaining the ability to perform well by first learning how.

In losing weight, it is most likely that you will be setting and pursuing both types of goals, learning as well as performance goals. "I will diet and lose 20 pounds"—a performance goal. Or, you could say this to yourself: "I will figure out what

things throw me off my diet, and then learn how to deal with those things differently”— definitely a learning goal.

A learning goal refocuses your attention away from just the end result. With a learning goal, you think instead about what it takes to achieve your intention, what strategies you will use, what processes are most relevant, and what you will have to learn. By setting your goal to learn or to master rather than to perform well, you inoculate yourself against the frustration and possible failure of having to perform well when you are faced with a difficult weight loss step, one that is clearly still outside of your ability.

### **Goal-setting**

When you set a goal, it indicates that you have a desire to alter your present condition to get to some future condition. This is just what you want when you are trying to lose unwanted weight.

Setting hard goals may bring you greater satisfaction once you achieve them, and perhaps also if you are on your way to achieving them. Greater satisfaction may be just the push you need to work your way up from sub-goal to larger goal to final goal. Unrealistically hard goals will most likely be self-defeating. For motivational efficiency goals need to be challenging, but not so challenging that you feel hopeless to meet the test.

Setting specific goals has a much more selective impact on your performance than setting general goals. For example, a specific goal would be going right back on your diet when you have a diet cheat. Even more specific would be going back on your diet at the very next meal after you have a diet cheat. By contrast, a very general goal is to do your best, or to lose a lot of weight.

For the most part, goals work best for you when they are as specific as you can make them. Specific goals can boost your performance because they provide a clear standard against which to measure progress and they define the kind and amount of effort you will need to expend.

Goal setting also performs the function of self-regulation. This is another way around the issue of having to exert too much self-control and willpower. By setting a goal you are making a commitment to do what is necessary. Just by setting any old goal, however, does not guarantee that you will be regulating yourself. Self-regulation within the framework of goal setting requires careful choice of goals, ones that have the proper amount of specificity, are not unrealistically difficult, are challenging, but can be achieved without an impossible effort.

## **Plans**

Like goals, on the whole plans work best when they are as specific as possible too. Plans help you prepare for various contingencies. A plan goes like this: *If this happens, then I will do that*. Finding out how you can implement each one of your goals or sub-goals is what is meant by a plan.

Having a plan makes you more prepared. Using the plan to get through a rough patch like a diet problem or some other weight loss difficulty requires less mental energy because you can rely on the plan. You made the plan beforehand. You anticipated what was coming. Keeping to the plan lets you do something known, something you are prepared for. This leaves energy to spare rather than feeling too challenged by having to exercise a lot of control when you are in the throes of the rough patch.

Without a plan you are left at the mercy of the situation, and to whatever you come up with in the moment to get yourself through it. Usually, this means

applying more self-control than you'd like, and maybe even trying to exert control that you don't have. Under these conditions, you are more likely to revert to old automatic behavior. You might find yourself so in need of feeling comfortable that you aim for comfort at any price, which seems necessary, but is not the best thing to do under the circumstances. Or, feeling worn out from having to think on your feet and from using such effortful control to get yourself through the rough patch, you experience certain interfering and unpleasant side effects like frustration, irritability, hopelessness and self-criticism. These unwanted side effects can quickly take you downhill to giving up, to quitting, or to compensate yourself the way you were used to doing—with food.

It is best to plan. Plan specifically. *If this happens, I will \_\_\_\_\_*, Lay out the plan with the greatest detail possible. Having the plan in mind like this will make it a lot easier and more certain that you will implement your goal properly and that the rough patch will not seem all that rough to you.

### **Automatic goals**

Goals become automatic and something you are not making an effort to set and pursue when you use them over and over for a given situation. The situation occurs and the situational clues elicit your reaction. This is the effect of habit on behavior. Goals become habits and habits become pretty automatic.

Psychological research has clearly shown that goals can be set and pursued outside a person's awareness. Once the goal is primed, you act accordingly in a situation that fits with what you were primed with. If certain key words were embedded in a reading task, like "win, compete, succeed, strive, and achieve", you are more to win than cooperate. When primed with words like old, careful, forgetful, retired, and wrinkle, you may walk more slowly than you did before you read the piece. Interestingly, you most likely would not be aware of the effect that the priming manipulation had on you.

Setting and pursuing your goals without you being conscious of them is both a problem and a solution. It is a problem because your old “moves” (now think of them as goals) to overeat, to use food for nonfood purposes, to eat calorie-rich foods, to keep up that feeling of fullness, all of these goals that you held so habitually still might be there ready to happen before you know it, even though you are trying to lose weight. If this happens, your changeover to newly primed goals that are commensurate with losing weight more effortlessly will have to wait. Your new goals will not become automatic until you begin to use your new goals consciously in situation after situation so that the situational clues can automate them and render them automatic and out of your awareness just like your old goals were.

## **Making mistakes**

Mistakes are not only common during the process of weight loss, they should be expected and used to further active learning of what to do and what not to do.

Trying to avoid making mistakes is a common approach in anything we do. Avoiding mistakes because we have made what mistakes we needed to in order to learn what to do and what not to do is vastly different from trying to avoid making mistakes altogether.

In fact, if you think about it, all the learning you have ever done had at its core, learning from your mistakes. Learning to walk, way back when. Learning to read, way back when. Learning to how to have sex, way back when. Learning a job or a craft. Learning to be a parent. Learning to be you. It all involved making mistakes and learning from your mistakes.

This is true of the weight loss process as well. So face it. It's best if you embrace the idea (don't wince) that mistakes are good.

Here's what openly accepting mistakes can do for you.

- Make you stop and think about what caused you to make a mistake
- Inform you about what knowledge and skills need further improvement
- Give you the feedback you need to correct and improve
- Reduce unpleasant emotional reactions like feeling frustrated, worrying too much, and being self-critical
- Free you to engage in better planning, monitoring, and evaluating your progress
- Encourage you to revise strategies
- Get you to think about the issues and deal with the issues from different perspectives
- Promote the kind of thinking and doing and personal presence that is useful in brand new, never-before encountered situations

One rather traditional mistake during any attempt to lose weight is cheating on a diet. Here's where mistake training fits right in. Instead of excoriating yourself up one side and down another for cheating, why not use the cheat (read: mistake) and learn from it. You can learn why you cheated so you can deal with this issue more head-on. You can learn how to recover from a cheat. That's important not only for sticking to the diet, but it is also the chance to practice slipping up a bit and recovering, which are two processes you will have to be up on after you stop dieting, when it comes to maintaining the weight you lost.

## **Monitoring**

One thing all women do when they are trying to lose weight is to monitor how they are doing. The most popular method to monitor weight loss progress is to keep track of how many pounds you have lost.

Unfortunately, pounds-lost works only if pounds are actually lost. There will be times when you don't lose any pounds. This happens to everyone during the weight loss process. There are weight loss plateaus, when your weight does not budge. You have lost 16 pounds in the weeks leading up to the plateau. For the past three weeks, though, you have not lost a single pound more. This can be terribly discouraging. It can even make you want to quit. "What's the use," you might say to yourself. "I'm not getting anywhere anyhow."

No pounds lost is the time to turn to other measures of how you are doing.

There are other lots of other measures of how you are doing. Having more ways to measure your progress than "pounds lost" is important because, despite losing no pounds, you still need to judge how you are doing. Knowing how you are doing has a bearing on your motivation and on your decisions about what to do next.

Another traditional way to gage weight loss progress is to see how your clothes fit. Are they still tight? Are they as tight? They are a little loose on you now after a month of losing weight. Or, you now take one size smaller. Or, after a long time working away at losing weight you can fit into an old pair of jeans.

You can, for instance, also use how full you are feeling as a measure of how you are doing. Remember when you used to feel so full you felt you would burst. Check yourself out. Even though you are not losing weight currently, has your stomach fullness feeling changed? Do you still have to loosen your belt, or worse still open your pants after every meal?

Then there is the amount of food you are eating. Are you still adhering to smaller portions, which was the method you chose for losing weight? Do you turn down seconds just like you planned? Are you still not snacking between meals?

Remember, you decided that snacking between meals was your big downfall, and you vowed to give those sneaky snack times up.

Besides the amount of food, there is the kind of food you are now eating. Are you doing what you intended here? How well are you doing it? Sometimes? Always? Never. Not enough. How would you rate your effort in the kind-of-food department? Are you still able to turn down particularly fattening food? Is the food you are eating predominantly good diet food?

Then there is how you are feeling physically. Do you feel lighter? Have you stopped huffing and puffing when you walk upstairs? Not yet? Maybe that's still to come.

Remember, it is important for you to have a variety of measures for how you are doing. The measures discussed so far have mostly to do with eating and food. There are nonfood markers of how you are doing as well. So step away from the pounds, the pants, and the portions and go to some nonfood indicators.

Are you happier? Yes, happier. Being heavy can weigh you down emotionally. Are you less negative? Negative thinking can lead to the kind of down mood that just calls for a food pick-me-up. What about being anxious? How are you doing there? Anxiety, if you have it, can be pretty unpleasant. Some people anticipate what is going to make them anxious, and they do something about it before they have to feel it—like have a smoke, or eat it away.

What about learning? Can you monitor how you are doing by seeing what you are learning? Have you learned anything? “Yes, I learned that I can only lose about a pound to a pound-and-a-half a week, on average. I was so psyched when I lost 4 pounds the first week. And I was down in the dumps when I didn't lose any last week. But I have steadied myself out. No more mood swings over how much or how little I lost. I read up on it, and average weight loss is about 1

to 1 ½ pounds a week. I learned that it is better to lose weight more slowly. Why? Because when you lose weight slowly, you are giving yourself more opportunity to learn to eat differently.”

As you can see, you can monitor behavior that leads to weight loss rather than monitoring weight loss itself. “I’m thinking about losing some weight.” “I’m getting ready to start.” “I started where I could, by not gaining any more weight for the past two weeks.” “I’ve been practicing standing up for myself at work, which has helped me not feel I have to replenish myself with food snacks after dinner.”

Self-testing is still another example of monitoring. How well do you know something? Can you tell false hunger from real hunger? Test yourself on this. Then test yourself to see too how well you know how to wait out false hunger? False hunger is when you think you are hungry, but you are really not. By waiting a set amount of time, you can see that the sensations you thought were hunger fade, and you no longer feel tempted to satisfy the previously demanding sensation.

You can monitor yourself on a list of do’s and don’ts you think are important for your continued weight loss success. Make the list and then check off the list periodically. Keep the old lists handy so you can compare how you did on them with any new lists you make.

Two things that you always monitor, often quite unconsciously, are time and effort. It is important how much time and effort it is taking you to do this or do that, or get to where you want to be with it. You are likely to allocate more time and effort to what you get high quality feedback on—feedback that is timely and specific. So, if you need to work on your eating life as well as your family life, then by all means give yourself high quality feedback on both.

Since trying to lose weight involves taking the kinds of actions that will lead you to your goal, you need the feedback that you get from monitoring to make adjustments so the efforts you are making pay off. The feedback you get may be telling you that it is necessary for you to change your goals, abandon those that are no longer working, and develop new goals, sub-goals perhaps, that are more fitting to the current circumstances. You may need to deal with obstacles, manage motivation, and make any number of adaptations, all contingent on the kind of feedback you are getting from monitoring yourself.

Your use of feedback, though, is not only affected by what you find out about yourself, but also by your beliefs. For example, when you run up against a problem that is stopping your progress, do you think you should be able to solve the problem quickly? Is doing it quickly important to you. If so, how fast you are working out the problem becomes a measure of your performance, and certainly something you monitor for.

The same is true of ease of accomplishing something; say for instance a weight loss step. If your standard of reference is amount of effort expended, then you will be monitoring for effort and evaluate your level of progress and mastery according to the amount of effort you had to put in.

There are lots of different beliefs people hold that figure into what they monitor themselves for. Here are a couple of others: It should be simple. There should only be one best way to do it. You have to be certain. There should be no ambiguity.

Why make such a big deal about your beliefs affecting what you monitor for? It can be a pretty big deal if you do not realize what you are doing and why you are doing it. Perhaps you want to keep your beliefs right where they are and not change them. In that case, you might ignore the feedback, reject it, think it's irrelevant, reinterpret the feedback so it conforms to your belief, make only

superficial changes to your belief in light of the feedback, or keep the feedback separate from your belief so your belief is not influenced by the feedback.

Monitoring yourself during the weight loss process still does one more thing for you besides give you (1) a measure of your performance and (2) the data you need for deciding what to do and when to do it. The feedback that you get from monitoring yourself also helps you stay engaged in the process of weight loss. And sticking with it makes all the difference in the world when it comes to losing unwanted weight.

## **The positive**

This is a different kind of positive. It's not put away your negative thinking and be positive. It is not finding ways to cheer yourself out of the dumps by slapping on some positive. The positive here has to do with overeating and overweight and what they do for you; how they are positive for you, and not only negative for you. Yes, you heard right. What are the positives of keeping all your weight on and eating the way you have been?

If you were to do an exercise in which you listed the positives and negatives of weight loss, and then you listed the positives and negatives of not losing any weight, what would it look like? Try it.

<u>Weight Loss</u>		<u>Not Losing Weight</u>	
Positives	Negatives	Positives	Negatives

Here's what the list looks like for most people. Lots of positives and few negatives for losing weight. Lots of negatives and few positives for not losing weight.

<u>Weight Loss</u>	<u>Not Losing Weight</u>
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Positives	Negatives	Positives	Negatives
xxxxxxx	xxxxxxx	xxxxxxx	xxxxxxx
xxxxxxx	xxxxxxx	xxxxxxx	xxxxxxx
xxxxxxx			xxxxxxx

The weight loss process is made a whole lot easier, though, if you work hard on coming up with positives for not losing weight. You need to identify these positives if you are going to give yourself a fighting chance to do something about your weight problem.

The positives about not losing weight are all the things that will get in your way when you try to lose weight, and when you try to maintain your weight loss. These are the obstacles that you will face. They are the tough dieting foes that will throw you off your weight loss course. These are the problems you have to solve. If you do not solve them, they make your weight loss journey a lot harder, cause you to resort to willpower and self-control, and they may even make your weight loss effort end prematurely.

Focus on these positives for not losing weight. Get to know them as well as you know the back of your hand. Focusing on them is the first step toward fixing them. You may not think so now, but just focusing on the positives of not losing weight is a big step in the right direction. Really acknowledging the reasons why you gained so much weight and kept it on for so long is a true eye opener. Forewarned is forearmed, and your awareness of these positives for staying overweight will help you maneuver your way through the process of weight loss with a lot less hassle.

This is a different kind of positive thinking, and for weight loss it's the one that counts.

## Practice

It may seem strange to think of practicing when it comes to losing unwanted weight. Yet if practices makes perfect, it means that something you do over and over you will learn to do very well. And doing something very well is exactly what you are looking for when it comes to eating less, changing your pattern of eating, changing how you think about food and about your weight, and making the weight loss process less effortful.

Theoretically some of the benefits that accrue from practice are:

- You add new and better methods to your ways of losing weight
- You improve the methods you are using
- You improve your process of method selection

A particular form of practice is mental practice. It's something you've probably done many times in your life, often without realizing you're doing it. You've probably done it when you have something difficult you want to say to someone else. You go over what you want to say in your mind before you say it to the other person. You say the words to yourself, first one way and then another. You might even visualize yourself with the other person, and visualize the other person's reaction as well; all of this taking place beforehand, before you say an actual word to this other person.

You can do the same with the process of weight loss. In fact, you might already be doing some mental practicing before undertaking a weight loss activity. It could be visualizing yourself beginning a diet or imagining some ways to stop yourself from cheating on a diet or conceptualizing and rehearsing how to stop your emotional eating. Practice for successful weight loss makes perfect sense. You probably cannot do too much of it. Even if you are already doing it, you can step it up—do more of it, do it more deliberately, and then see how it pays off.

With the idea of practice and its value in mind, you could separate practice from the actual performance—of losing weight, that is—and move it backward in time so it comes before you actually go ahead and start the weight loss process or before you start any weight loss activity. In this case, you would be anticipating what skills you are going to need in order to lose your excess weight. Will you have to think differently, feel differently, and act differently? If so, what will you need in order to do it?

Training is a form of practicing before you actually have to perform. Training implies something more formal than trying the words out in your mind before you say them to someone else. Training usually means a regimen of practice that you set up for yourself so you can use what you develop in the training period afterward for the performance.

What if you trained to lose unwanted weight? Would you be better prepared?

The training would be in thinking differently, feeling differently, and acting differently when it comes to your pattern of eating and what affects your eating behavior.

Let's look at the job that lies ahead of you—losing some weight, maybe even losing a lot of weight. What will the job entail? For example, are you an emotional eater? If so, you will have to deal with your emotional eating. Do you easily feel deprived? Then what are you going to do about feeling deprived? Are you prone to breaking promises to yourself? If so, losing weight and keeping it off is one big promise to yourself that you want to keep, isn't it?

All of these things and more can be practiced beforehand. That's when you can work out the kinks, develop the wherewithal, learn what you need to learn, build confidence, and then apply it when it comes to the actual tasks involved in reducing your weight.

## Priming

Having to be especially conscious of what you are doing to lose unwanted weight, like having to use too much willpower and self-control, often turns out to require too much effort. To lighten your load, you can turn to the psychological process of priming. An example of priming is being in a “place” literally or psychologically that you associate with trying harder, doing better, making it easier for you. You could be in a classroom or sports arena, and just being there gets you to feel like achieving or winning. Or, you might be influenced by seeing a movie, or reading a story, or even reading certain words (achieve, strive, accomplish, win), and then without realizing it, you take this influence with you and are likely to act on it.

You can look for what will prime you, and make the weight loss process much easier, less effortful. It could be getting some extra achievement motivation or inspiration from somewhere. This is where your exercise routine could be of help—psychological help, that is. Sticking to your exercise routine is a big achievement and it can be inspirational. Increasing your exercise routine as you master the earlier steps might also be the kind of experience that primes you for losing weight. The endurance, the confidence, and the new feel to your body that you developed while exercising you may carry with you into dieting.

If you are not the exercise type, you can prime yourself in a thousand different ways. You could, for instance, develop a more loving relationship with your spouse or partner. The elements of that relationship may be just what the doctor ordered for successful weight loss: feeling worth it, getting love from a person (not from food), feeling special, feeling deserving, feeling satisfied.

There may be primes already in your life that you don’t have to work hard at, that you don’t have to develop; they may just be there. Take a look around and see what influences are available to you that would help you not have to work so hard

at the tasks involved in reducing your weight. Anything you can do to lighten your load so you don't have to resort to such tight conscious control will make your end goal that much more achievable.

## **Getting ready**

Too many women with excess weight to lose believe that all it takes to start a weight loss regimen is a decision to do so. Their logic goes like this: "I haven't decided to start dieting. Once I decide, I'll start."

To these women, "deciding to" looks like it works. But weight loss failure is so prevalent that the belief that "deciding to" works has to be a form of false optimism. If anything, the naïve belief in simply "deciding to" contributes to false starts and sudden stops, making it impossible to lose weight. Once a dieter is truly ready, "deciding to" takes on new meaning.

So what exactly does it take to get truly ready to start the weight loss journey? Probably first off, you have to want to do it. Wanting to is your point of departure. A lot goes into "wanting to". "Wanting to" is not a homogeneous motivation. It has depth and breadth and lots of parts. It is most likely made up of many experiences over a great deal of time, making wanting to a conclusion that you've come to from these experiences.

Some of these experiences that make up the "I want to" will be bad, but definitely motivating. You will "want to" start dieting to avoid having these bad experiences again. For example, feeling way too full and bloated can scare you into wanting to do something about it. Seeing a very fat woman in your very own personal mirror can start you thinking about how you do not want to look fat. Experiences that make you uncomfortable enough to start thinking about doing something about being really heavy are where a truer than true "I want to" comes from.

There are also your good experiences that make you genuinely motivated to lose weight. Let's say you were recognized for some achievement you made, and you felt proud of yourself. You might take this prideful feeling and use it to feel ready to take some small, but mighty weight loss step.

As you can see, "wanting to" is part of the process of becoming mentally prepared to reduce your weight. "Wanting to" is very different from "deciding to". So next time—diet-wise and weight-loss-wise—make sure you "want to" and not just "decide to".

In other words, to be ready to lose unwanted weight, you should have at least some of the motivation you need. You don't need all of it; you need just enough motivation to be ready. You have to "want it" just enough to get ready—ready to start. The rest of the motivation you can pick up as you go along. In fact, with success comes the feeling I can do it. And along with the feeling that you can do it, comes more motivation to do it.

As part of getting ready, you will also need emotional wherewithal to use your motivation well. Emotional wherewithal is what you bring with you to empower your motivation. It is not really separate from motivation, but without it as an integral part of your motivation, you will not have what it takes to turn your wish into realistic thinking.

Having the emotional wherewithal means that emotionally you have what it takes to ride out the bumps in the road. In this case, it will be the bumps you encounter in your motivation. For the past month or so, for example, your motivation might have been down. You sapped all your motivation that you worked so hard to build up by being so caught up in work issues or family matters or any number of motivation depleting issues. With these two diet-readying resources, motivation and emotional wherewithal, you have the makings of a commitment to yourself, and an "I want to" that stands for something.

## **Going back to old ways**

Here you are. It is your daily life, and you're living it just as you would like. You have lost all your unwanted weight, and you've been able to maintain your weight right where it is for a good long time. But there were those occasions when you were put to the test. There was the likelihood on these occasions that you would not maintain your good eating habits, and you were afraid that you would regain weight that you lost.

Or, here you are, having lost some weight. You were clipping along quite well until you hit that snag. Now the weight you lost is in jeopardy. You were dealt a blow and you feel your resolve slipping. You are afraid that you will fall back into old ways.

It's best, if you can, to take the threat of relapse out of your life. It can be done. You can prevent relapse. It actually is something you can work at and accomplish. It's best, though, to do what you can about the specter of relapsing before it is upon you.

You can plan and practice ways to prevent your return to old eating habits way before there is any real danger. You can do this by first identifying situations that might cause you to revert to your old ways. Then you can see what it is in the situation that is likely to trip you up. It's best to look outside yourself at all the different elements of the situation. But then look inside yourself too at what emotionally you might be bringing to the situation and to what the situation could bring out emotionally in you.

Getting yourself ready like this is a solid relapse prevention technique. It provides you with the protection you need to keep on living that good life and reap the reward of the hard work you did or are doing to shed all those extra pounds.

## **Your Thinking**

### **You can do it**

Thinking you can do it—a specific weight loss activity or a specific weight loss step—is important to achieving your weight loss goal. The evaluation you make of your competence to do what you have to do is important to your success. You can, of course, increase your sense of competence by coping with a weight loss step successfully. But it is also important how you feel about your competence before you take that weight loss step.

If you think of yourself as having little or no competence when you are about to try to do this or do that to lose weight, you are more likely to resort to an old coping method, one that is not good for you. The temptation to lapse into old well-worn behaviors is high when your evaluation of your competence to handle some weight loss activity or other is low.

Be careful, though, when you evaluate your competence not to make the mistake of thinking that just because you can do one kind of weight loss activity you should be able to do another. Despite having an overall belief in your own competency, there are specific competencies as well. For example, you can feel confident about your ability to start dieting but have little self-confidence when it comes to recovering from a setback like falling off your diet.

It is best, if you can, to think of reducing your weight as an opportunity to learn how to develop the competence you need for some of those weight loss steps where you do not feel as confident of your ability. If you adopt this attitude, you will not feel so incompetent when you don't have what it takes at the moment.

Be warned though, getting rid of your unwanted weight is not only a losing proposition pound-wise; the process you have to go through to lose weight can keep you on the brink of losing more than weight, like losing control, losing out on

an opportunity, losing your good judgment. You not only lose excess weight during the weight loss process, you can expect to lose your feeling of competence as well, more than a few times. If you want to have success losing weight, then you have to be ready for the consequences, one of which is losing confidence in yourself and your ability to do what is called for, and having to find your confidence again time after time.

The weight loss process demands a lot of you. You are expected to build confidence, maintain confidence, and regain lost confidence. You pretty definitely will not get started with all the self-confidence you need. You will have to establish at least a modicum of competence, though, and then increase and strengthen it as you go along. Even when you have built a good feeling of competence for step after weight loss step, your focus will be on keeping your feeling of competence strong enough so you can count on it for the very next step.

## **You can change**

You can create more hope and more forward movement by thinking of your ability to lose unwanted weight as something you can change and make grow rather than as something that is a given, and is fixed and unchanging.

The same is surprisingly true for your body. Having a belief that your own body weight is changeable makes a big difference. What I am talking about here is believing that your body weight, like your ability to change it, is not fixed. It is changeable. Having this belief is especially helpful when your weight loss effort is threatened, like when you cheat on your diet and then have the urge to give up and just splurge.

How does believing your ability and your body weight is changeable work? First of all, it helps you stay motivated and committed rather than giving up on

yourself. Your diet cheat is not the end of the world. Your world is shaken for a moment or two, but having the belief that your ability and your body weight are changeable refreshes your sense that you can do something about the mistake you just made. Secondly, having the belief that these kinds of changes are possible encourages you to think of weight loss strategies to make this belief come true.

Facing weight loss challenges with the strong belief that you are changeable puts you in the mindset to follow through and find ways to make what's changeable change, which again makes the process of weight loss less effortful.

### **What could have been**

How you go about picking yourself up or putting yourself down for something you did not do, did do, should have done, or should not have done makes a big difference. The way in which you represent your past experiences to yourself (if only I would have *tried harder*, then *I would have done better*.) can influence your feelings (regret, disappointment, tension, relief, gratitude) and judgments (shame, guilt, responsibility, self-blame, approval) about yourself, and have a big impact on whether you change and improve.

In going over things, you think about how the situation could have been better or worse. This is where you think about the consequences of having taken one action or another. Thinking like this leads you to consider alternatives. Sometimes the alternatives are better than the outcome, "If only I hadn't eaten so much, I would have lost more weight." Sometimes the alternatives are worse than the outcome: "If I didn't stand up for myself, I know I would have pigged out after dinner."

It is not only the actual fact that you could have done otherwise; it also has to do with your perception that you could have done otherwise. One danger of thinking

what *could* have been is where you turn a “what could have been” into a “what should have been”. This happens when you believe that you could have had more control over the circumstances or more control over yourself than you exercised, but in reality you could not have. “I should have thought before I acted.” You can also think you should have known it or done it if it was easy for you to imagine an alternative solution. “I can see now what I should have done in that situation.” In cases like this where you distort the facts with these kinds of misperceptions, you will most likely feel disappointed in yourself.

If you approach thinking you could have done it differently with caution, keeping in mind it can backfire on you, “what could have been” can help you to work toward understanding why you did what you did. It can guide you right into thinking, “What are my options?” With this mindset, you can compare and generate ideas. You make connections that you otherwise might not have made. You prepare for challenges. You grow concerned about taking action, and you increase your desire to move forward, and put the past behind you.

## **Support**

When you are working at reducing your weight, do you do it pretty much by yourself, or do you look for support?

Supportive relationships can protect you and motivate you. Losing unwanted weight with a partner, for instance, can increase your adherence to the weight loss process as well as make you have more success in shedding those extra pounds.

When you are working hard at reducing your weight, you may want different kinds of support. You may want support for your feelings, someone to back you up when it comes to how and what you are feeling. You may want advice and help in thinking about which weight loss steps come next or how to get more

motivation for losing weight. What if you want someone to take over some of the day-to-day load, so you don't deplete your energy like you have done so many times in the past, and then given up and stopped losing weight? This may be the kind of support that makes all the difference in the world. Then, too, there is just the feeling of belonging. That can be very supportive, especially when you are in the process of giving up your old identity of being an overweight woman.

When there are personal changes to be made, you may not only turn to friends and families and professionals, you also can turn to self-help experiences—self-help groups, self-help TV, self-help internet, and self-help books. There is plenty of self-help when it comes to dieting and exercise: lots of different diets, different programs, all kinds of exercises and exercise equipment, lots of books to choose from. But if losing weight is mostly psychological, what's really needed when it comes to losing your unwanted weight is psychology self-help.

Currently, when it comes to the process of losing weight, psychology self-help takes a back seat to diet and exercise self-help. There are some psychologically based self-help groups. There are counselors and therapists who can be of help. There are psychology and psychology-like self-help books that address the problems of eating and weight and their causes.

Self-help books, as countless numbers of people have discovered, can be very supportive. They support you by giving information, advice, encouragement, inspiration, and help in thinking things through. Like all self-help resources, they back your feelings and show interest in your emotional wellbeing. They are nonjudgmental and impartial, but still give you what guidance and support you are looking for. Like self-help groups, self-help books can give you the feeling of belonging as well.

This brings up the fifth and final premise.

## **Premise**

## Conclusion

It takes using psychology to lose weight. There is always a connection between feelings and food, and that should be enough to show how necessary psychology really is if you want to lose weight. If you do not want to think of this food-feeling connection, if you do not even believe there is a connection between how you feel and how you eat, this still does not rule out psychology.

There are habits and patterns of behavior, motivation, frustrations, successes and failures, goal setting, goal pursuit, and goal attainment, all having to do with psychology. There is getting yourself mentally ready to do something about your weight problem. There is starting, and developing a desire into an intention. There is planning, and thinking how to implement what you intend. There is persevering, talking yourself through difficult times, making deals with yourself so you can stay the course, and finally there is what it takes mentally, motivationally, and emotionally to maintain your weight loss.

There is no way that psychology is not heavily involved.

## About MariasLastDiet.com

MariasLastDiet.com is a website for women who want to lose weight and keep the weight off permanently. The website gives women ways of using psychology to lose weight. It does this through the presentation of ideas, strategies, and illustrative cases. The focus is on giving help, advice, information, inspiration, and encouragement. All are needed for successful permanent weight loss.

The goal of MariasLastDiet.com is to help women throughout the weight loss process—starting, sticking to it, keeping the weight off for good. MariasLastDiet

gives you ways to resolve problems that can make weight loss be much too demanding and difficult, like relying primarily on willpower and self-control, coming up against hard-to-break habits, dealing with emotional eating, and any other personal weight loss spoiler.