

Chapter 1

Is sustainable weight loss possible?

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C hances are, you've heard the same statistic over and over again. And if it's true that 95% of diets end in failure, it's reasonable to conclude that trying to lose weight is not worth the effort. Nobody is going to tell you that it is easy to achieve weight loss that lasts. But it is possible. Let's begin to explore exactly how to win the weight-loss battle.

Myth I

You can't lose weight and keep it off

Believers Beware!

The sad reality is that you have about as great a chance of losing weight and keeping it off as you do of winning the lottery. This is just a simple fact of life. Everybody knows it. Every magazine article and television show on the topic gives the same facts: 95% of diets fail, and for those who do lose weight, it's just about guaranteed that they'll gain it all back. When the media interviews experts who study weight loss for a living, they all say this is true.

The results of weight-loss failure surround us. Everybody has coworkers, neighbors, friends, and family who have lost weight—lots of it—only to gain it back within a relatively short period of time.

There are many reasons why sustained weight loss is impossible. For some people, it is because they have a medical condition like a slow thyroid or a naturally slow metabolism. Another reason is that losing weight slows down the metabolism, forcing your body to regain the weight even though you're eating less.

Losing weight and keeping it off? It's just not possible!

Kernels of Truth

There are reports from credible sources that give some pretty negative statistics. In the 1950s, Dr. Albert J. Stunkard summarized his findings about weight-loss methods available at that time. The finding was that 95% of diets fail. Likewise, an expert panel from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) reported in 1992 that people who completed a weight-loss program could expect to regain about two-thirds of the loss after one year and virtually all their lost weight after five years. These two reports are widely used and reused in the media and in scientific circles.

Another kernel of truth is that no single weight-loss method available today can help every overweight or obese person get down to an ideal weight and stay there forever. This book shows that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to weight loss. Every person needs a slightly different approach.

It's also true that weight loss means a lower metabolism—the number of calories burned in the course of daily living. You'll read more about metabolism in the following chapters, but it's based on the fact that a smaller body simply needs fewer calories than a larger body. A smaller body typically has less muscle on it, and this translates into a lower metabolism. In addition, restricting calories during the weight-loss process can cause metabolism to slow down a bit, especially if the restriction is extreme (for example, an 800-calorie-a-day diet). The effect isn't enough to prevent weight loss, but it will slow down the rate of loss.

And it's also true that certain medical conditions and treatments can make weight loss more difficult. A slow thyroid, called *hypothyroidism*, slows metabolism and calorie burning. Medications, such as steroids used to treat inflammatory diseases, several drugs used to treat anxiety, depression, and similar conditions, and some drugs used to treat diabetes, stimulate the appetite. For people taking these medications, it's tough to stay committed to a weight-loss program because they are truly hungry.

Finally, our environment works against sustained weight loss. We are surrounded by a lot of food that is filled with calories, tastes good,

Have you ever heard...

“Since I can’t keep weight off, I’m better off just accepting myself the way I am at my current weight.”

Excess weight increases your disease risk. We discuss this in detail in the next chapter. Although positive self-reinforcement is important, losing weight and keeping it off is paramount for your health. This book provides you with the proof—both from the world of science and from experiences of Weight Watchers members—that sustainable weight loss is possible.

and is heavily advertised. We also live in an environment where modern technology has taken away a lot of our opportunities to burn calories. We don’t even have to get up from the couch to change the channels on our televisions anymore. The combination of the two—too much great-tasting food and too little activity—can make sustained weight loss a challenge.

The Whole Truth

The Old Numbers Don’t Tell the Full Story

The reports about diet failure need to be put into context. The discouraging 95% statistic dates back to the 1950s. Dr. Stunkard, the father of that number, is the first to say that it is no longer accurate because weight-loss methods today are so different from those used fifty years ago. Moreover, most weight-loss studies clump all dieting methods into a single pool (as if the Cabbage Soup Diet and a doctor-supervised medical program were the same) and are based on a one-time effort. Finally, the typical person who enrolls in a clinical study at the obesity clinic of a research university is not a typical American who wants to lose weight.

To get a more accurate picture of the incidence of sustained weight loss, a group of researchers randomly polled people from the general

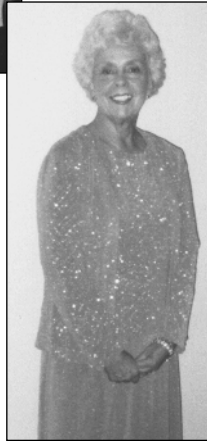
Personal Triumph

Sandra Franczyk

ILLINOIS



Sandra Franczyk battled her weight for a good part of her adult life, having lost weight many times only to gain it back. She tried a storefront weight-loss center and numerous other approaches but was unable to achieve the lasting weight loss that she so wanted. Then she joined Weight Watchers and gained a new perspective on managing her weight. Sandra left behind the many weight-loss myths she had once believed in.



“I don’t intend to ever go back to my old habits. Those days are gone.”

By incorporating the weight-loss success factors that are built into the Weight Watchers program, Sandra kept weight off for the first time in her life. “I closely monitor what I eat. In restaurants, I don’t just order what is on the menu. I ask questions about foods I might want to order. I never was very active, but

once I joined Weight Watchers, I started to exercise. Now I walk or use the exercise bike at least one hour per day. Now that I’ve been so successful, I don’t intend to ever go back to my old habits. Those days are gone.”

Sandra lost 49 pounds to reach her goal.

public and asked them about their weight-loss experiences. More than one-half of five hundred people surveyed had lost at least 10% of their maximal body weight at some point in their adult life (there will be more on the health benefits of a 10% weight loss in chapter 2). Among those who had intentionally lost weight, almost 50% reported having kept it off for at least one year at the time of the survey, and 25% stated that it had been at least five years. The researchers concluded that sustainable weight loss is not nearly as uncommon as we've been led to believe.

In a different study, a team of researchers from Drexel University surveyed Weight Watchers members who reached their goal and completed the six-week maintenance program. That survey of more than one thousand people found that an average of more than three-fourths of the weight that was lost was still gone after one year and almost one-half after five years. This contrasts sharply with the 1992 NIH report that people who complete a weight-loss program can expect to keep off one-third of the loss after one year and virtually none at five years. The Weight Watchers data were presented at a 2004 international conference on obesity, causing quite a stir. Obesity experts attributed the superior results to the combination of healthy food choices, regular physical activity, positive behavior changes, and supportive atmosphere that are all an integral part of the Weight Watchers program.

Incorporate Success Factors into Your Weight-Loss Method

How you lose weight makes a difference in how much you lose and how successful you are in keeping it off. In 1995, the Institute of Medicine (IOM), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to advise U.S. policy makers on health-related issues in an unbiased and science-based way, issued a report about weight loss. The IOM's *Weighing the Options* report evaluated the pool of weight-loss research and included a summary of those factors with proven links to weight-loss success. The more success factors you make part of your weight-loss method, the more likely you are to win. All of these success factors have been

incorporated into the Weight Watchers program (see the Afterword for more about this).

RESEARCH-BACKED FACTORS PREDICTING WEIGHT-LOSS SUCCESS

Factors Linked with Reaching a Weight-Loss Goal	Factors Linked with Sustainable Weight Loss
Attendance at a program	Regular physical activity
Weight loss early in the program	Self-monitoring weight and food-related behavior
Sticking with it	Positive coping skills
Social support	Keeping in contact with people who helped with weight loss
Regular physical activity	"Normal" eating patterns
Behavior modification techniques	Health improvements
Self-monitoring	
Goal setting	

Source: Adapted from Institute of Medicine. *Weighing the Options. Criteria for Evaluating Weight-Management Programs*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1995.

Sustainable Weight Loss Is Possible

In addition to the inspiring stories throughout this book, there are two large databases filled with evidence that sustainable weight loss *is* possible: the National Weight Control Registry (NWCR) and the Lifetime Member (LTM) Database from Weight Watchers. These two databases include information on thousands of people like you, your friends, and your family members who have successfully lost weight and kept it off.

Over a decade ago, Drs. Rena Wing and James Hill founded the NWCR, which includes several thousand people who have lost at least 30 pounds and kept the weight off for at least one year. As of 2003, NWCR participants had lost an average of 66 pounds and kept it off for an average of five years.

The Weight Watchers LTM Database is the largest and longest-standing database on people who have successfully lost weight. Any Weight Watchers member who reaches a goal weight that is within the healthy range and maintains that weight through a six-week maintenance phase of the Program is included in the LTM Database. The two databases have some overlap because there are people in the

LTM Database who have also volunteered their information to NWCR.

Have you ever heard...

“Since I am doomed to fail at sustaining at my weight loss, why even try?”

With all the success factors of sustainable weight loss in place, trying is *very* important. If you have followed an extreme diet in the past, you know that weight loss is doable and so is regaining weight. The best strategy is to look for a comprehensive weight-loss method, then make it work for you.

How did the people who are part of the NWCR and Weight Watchers LTM Database succeed? They simply learned how to incorporate the basics of a comprehensive weight-loss method into their lives using approaches that work for them. As you will learn, the habits and skills that they developed as part of the weight-loss process have become so second nature that they say sustaining the loss is easier than taking the weight off in the first place!

These basic components are so important that they are a common thread throughout this book. They have also spawned their own myths and traps. By looking at the remaining nine myths more closely, you'll be able to avoid the traps that may be getting in the way of your successful weight loss.

In order to overcome the powerful myth that it is not possible to sustain weight loss, you need to have all four components in place: making wise food choices, being physically active, making positive lifestyle changes, and creating a supportive atmosphere. Let's look more closely at each one.

Make Wise Food Choices

Our food world is complicated. We are surrounded by tasty, affordable food choices. We are constantly reminded of food by the media,

How They Do It

Basic Components in a Comprehensive Weight-Loss Method

- Wise food choices
- Regular physical activity
- Positive lifestyle change
- Supportive atmosphere

advertisements, and the presence of restaurants and fast-food places everywhere. Making wise food choices is a vital skill. People who adopt specific strategies to deal with food choices are well on their way to sustainable weight loss.

This may take a bit of thinking ahead. It may seem obvious, but many people neglect this important success factor. We're not referring to detailed planning, which is not possible for most of us because of our hectic schedules. Thinking ahead means that you

1. Always have foods available that you want to eat
2. Have access to fresh fruits and vegetables
3. Start the day with a good healthy breakfast
4. Plan healthy snacks
5. Plus dozens of other simple actions to make wise food choices

Finding the eating structure that fits you best helps you create a livable, sustainable eating plan to match your food preferences. It's important to enjoy the food and the eating patterns you use to lose weight because these are the same foods and patterns that will help you keep the weight off.

Include Regular Physical Activity

An overwhelming majority of the NWCR volunteers are physically active virtually every day. People who have sustained weight loss have figured out how to incorporate regular physical activity into their lives. The most popular activity is one that is easy for almost all of us to do—walking. People who successfully sustain their weight loss get so

much benefit from regular physical activity that they wouldn't dream of a day without it.

Regular physical activity has three important elements. The first is that the activity has to fit into your life, whether in a set block of time or in little nooks and crannies throughout the day. You can squeeze in a bit of activity by taking the stairs at work, parking farther away from the store on errands, taking a ten-minute walk at lunchtime, or walking the dog at the end of the day.

These activities may sound too small to make a difference. But if you take a daily ten-minute walk at lunchtime for a year and change nothing else about your eating or activity, you can lose more than five pounds! Imagine the result if you incorporated a number of these simple activities into your daily routine.

Chapter 4 presents more information about the role of exercise and strategies to incorporate it into your daily life. Throughout the book, we're hoping to show you that small lifestyle changes can translate into big changes in your weight. These positive changes are the key to sustainable weight loss.

The second element of regular physical activity may seem obvious. Find physical activities that you enjoy. If you like an activity, you're more likely to stick with it. What is right for you might be different from what works for your family members or friends. That is okay. The key is to find something that you look forward to and enjoy such as walking outdoors or doing more structured activities like swimming, bicycling, or aerobics with a favorite exercise tape. Don't turn your life upside down—your chances of success are greater if you create a plan that is livable for you.

The third element is to look for activities that you can do almost every day. Consistent exercisers get the most benefit, and once you incorporate exercise into your daily life, it becomes second nature.

Make Positive Lifestyle Changes

The value of a positive mindset for lasting weight loss is frequently overlooked. It shouldn't be. You have to believe that you can do it—that you can lose weight and keep it off. Whether weight has become an

issue only recently or if you have been overweight for a long time, having a positive mindset and making the changes that go with it are vital in accomplishing your goal of lasting weight loss.

For many of the people who share their stories in this book, their battle with the bulge was longstanding. The same holds true with the NWCR volunteers, with almost half reporting that their weight issues began in childhood. Despite this, they were able to look beyond what didn't work in the past and focus on what they wanted to achieve.

You should have both short-term and long-term goals. Short-term goals like losing weight for a special event are easier to achieve and have immediate rewards. But setting only short-term goals is not enough. You also need a long-term mindset that takes life beyond weight loss into account.

Making positive changes to your lifestyle also means taking personal responsibility for your weight. All of us have the ability to harness our internal power to make wise choices for healthy, livable, sustainable weight loss.

Lifestyle change requires focus. Both the Weight Watchers LTM Database and NWCR participants maintain a consistent focus on their weight management strategies. This does not mean that they are overly rigid with their diet or take exercise to extremes. Rather, they have learned the skill of flexible restraint and have developed habits, routines, and approaches that support their ability to sustain weight loss.

Create a Supportive Atmosphere

A supportive atmosphere is important for losing weight and keeping it off. Eating can be a highly social event, whether during family meals, meals with friends, or in times of celebration or sorrow. The fact is that food is one of the great pleasures of life. Sharing weight goals with others helps enlist their support. It is generally much better to let people who care about you know that you are trying to control your weight. They can be of great help. There's more on this important topic in chapter 10.

Personal Triumph

Michele Pollack

CALIFORNIA



“I was not just trying to maintain, I was trying to change my lifestyle.”

Michele Pollack, a teacher, had been a Weight Watchers member at the elementary school where she teaches but stopped attending when the school year ended. Three years later, Michele returned to Weight Watchers with a girlfriend. She was recently engaged but didn't join Weight Watchers just because she was getting married—she joined because going to Weight Watchers meetings was the same as getting together with friends.

“This time, I was really motivated. I saw results right away, and going with a friend was key because we had a standing date each week.

I knew I would lose the weight, and that's easy. When I reach my goal, that's when the work comes in.

“I was afraid of gaining it back because I had lost weight before and always gained it back. But I realized that I had to think about my weight every day and keep my life changes in the forefront. I was not just trying to maintain, I was trying to change my lifestyle.”

Michele lost 15 pounds to reach her goal.

A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* showed that the number of Weight Watchers meetings a person attended was highly predictive of total weight loss. In fact, those who attended more than 80% of meetings held during the two-year study lost more than twice as much weight as people who attended less regularly. The reason for this is simple: spending time with and learning from the experiences of others who are also losing weight is very important to accomplishing weight goals.

Setting Unreasonable Goals Backfires

If you start out with an expectation of permanent perfection or with a weight-loss goal that is too high, you are likely to be disappointed. At the beginning of a study done at the University of Pennsylvania, participants were asked how they would feel about losing the amount of weight that the researchers could predict would be the likely result. Participants said that they would be disappointed. To be satisfied or “happy” about their weight loss, the participants said that the amount would have to be substantially more. Being dissatisfied with a realistic weight loss is counterproductive.

So what is a realistic goal? Successful weight loss is typically losing about 10% of body weight in six months. More rapid or dramatic loss is possible, but it is the exception, not the rule. For sustainable weight loss, changes should be made in a stepwise, realistic, achievable way.

There Is No Set Point That Prevents Sustained Weight Loss

Metabolism slows down a bit during weight loss. As a result, the number of calories that the body burns during weight loss is a little bit lower than would be the case if body weight were stable. Several preliminary studies on weight loss and metabolism suggested that this dip in metabolism was permanent. In turn, these studies were used as proof

that a body has a natural set point, or a body weight that it must defend. By maintaining a reduced metabolism following weight loss, the body would be more likely to regain weight, returning to its set point.

As sometimes happens in science, however, the findings from the preliminary studies did not stand up to the test of rigorous scientific scrutiny. Since those early reports, a series of precise studies using sophisticated technology have been done at the University of Alabama in Birmingham, which have proven that the set point theory is not true. Researchers showed that metabolism goes back to expected levels with sustained weight loss, confirming that metabolism and the number of calories burned during a day is related to weight and amount of muscle but not to weight loss.

The Bottom Line

There are clearly plenty of people who have achieved sustainable weight loss. What sets them apart is not who they are but the fact that they have learned the basic components of a comprehensive weight-loss method and have incorporated them into their daily lives. They make wise food choices, are physically active, have a healthy lifestyle with a positive mindset, and are in a supportive environment.

The longer the weight loss is sustained, the easier it becomes. Success breeds success, so set yourself up for success by choosing realistic goals that are important to you and believing that you can achieve them.

The method you use to lose weight—both for taking the weight off and for keeping it off—makes a difference in how successful you will be. You are not destined to regain weight once you've lost it.

It is important to recognize the kernel of truth in the myth of sustainable weight loss. Sustainable weight loss doesn't automatically happen. You need to put your mind to it and arm yourself with the right tools. But it's time to avoid being trapped by the myth that sustainable weight loss is impossible. This entire book is based on the scientific evidence that you can achieve a lasting weight loss!

Personal Triumph

Kelly Hackworth Smith

TEXAS



“I had to find a way to live with food, and Weight Watchers taught me how to eat again.”

Kelly Hackworth Smith wanted to start a family. At 273 pounds, however, Kelly was informed by her doctor that she should not try to get pregnant because pregnancy was too risky for her health and for an unborn baby.

“At my high weight, I was on a path to a lot of health problems and risks. I was only 25, and it was really frightening. My weight got out of control in college. My husband and I went out to eat a lot, and I am a stress eater.

“I had to find a way to live with food, and Weight Watchers taught me how to eat again. My Meeting Leader also helped me set smaller weight-loss goals of 25 pounds. Reaching 25 pounds was easy, but getting to 50 pounds was more challenging because I got stuck at a plateau and started sabotaging my eating and weight loss. Once I realized what I was doing, I got back on track. I got stuck again around my 75-pound and 100-pound goals.

“Looking back, I realize that I felt a lot of pressure trying to reach the higher milestones. I was trying so hard to do everything right. I also realized that I didn’t have to be perfect all the time as long as I got right back on track.”

Kelly eventually lost over 117 pounds to reach her goal weight.

Weight Loss That Lasts

Action Steps

The path to sustainable weight loss needs a beginning. As you put your new knowledge to work and embark on a comprehensive weight-loss method, there are several things you can do. The goal is to maximize your knowledge so that you are prepared to make informed decisions for your best approach.

- Consult with your doctor before starting any weight management program. It is a good idea to get a complete physical before beginning a diet and/or exercise program to rule out medical limitations.
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist if any of the medications that you're taking might affect your weight-loss success by increasing your appetite or slowing your metabolism. The good news is that in almost all cases other drugs are available that treat the same condition but do not affect weight. It is worth finding out whether a simple change in your medication can remove this potential obstacle.
- Think about weight-loss methods that you have used in the past. How many of the factors that predict successful weight loss and sustained weight loss were part of these methods? Are there things that you could have done differently to include more factors?
- What do you see as your "happy" weight and when do you see yourself achieving it? If your answer is a weight that is less than 90% of your current body weight and your time frame for reaching that weight is in less than six months, rethink your expectations. A reasonable goal is a loss of 10% of your current weight over six months. Start with that goal—you may very well surprise yourself by exceeding it!
- Identify at least three people you know who have successfully lost weight and are keeping it off. Find out about their experience—

what method they used, what strategies and approaches they took to make it work for them, and what they are doing to sustain the weight loss. Compare what they tell you about the factors of successful weight loss, the factors for sustained weight loss, and the basic components of a weight-loss program.

- Remind yourself often and with confidence that sustained weight loss is possible. Your body will not undermine your achievements by slowing metabolism so that you gain the weight back.