

Chew over a few diet truths

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Get a grip ... even those who do lose weight often become disillusioned when related goals - a partner or a better job - aren't immediately realised.

Photo: Natalie Boog

We struggle to shed weight gained during the silly season, but are invariably disappointed. Nick Galvin looks at why diets don't work - and finds out what does.

Consider these two related facts.

Fact one: Australians spend a staggering \$745 million on weight-loss products every year. This includes low-calorie pre-prepared meals, meal-replacement shakes, supplements and diet books (but not gym memberships and other exercise-related expenses).

The diet business is booming because we're fatter than ever and plenty of us are desperate to get thin.

Fact two: Almost without exception, anyone who tries to lose weight rapidly with a diet fails. They might shed kilos in the short term but will ultimately put it all back on - and then some. In fact, one of the authors of a study published in the *American Psychologist* journal in 2007 went so far as to call dieting "a consistent predictor of future weight gain".

Perversely, it seems, if you want to get fatter, just go on a diet and wait for a bit.

EVIDENCE

Dr Leah Brennan, a clinical psychologist and senior research fellow at Monash University's centre for obesity research and education, says research that tracks dieters for one to two years is unequivocal.

"Usually, people are very close to their starting weight at two years, if not already there at 12 months," she says. "Generally, the research shows that six months is the maximum people can sustain the behaviour changes that lead to weight loss. Beyond that, people particularly have problems with weight maintenance."

There are many well-established reasons why diets don't work, both physiological and psychological. One of the many psychological stumbling blocks revolves around so-called "primary goals". These are what people hope to achieve by losing weight. In other words, most people don't go on a diet just to see decreasing numbers on the scales; they want to find a partner, wear nicer clothes, be more popular or get a better job.

Even if they manage to get the weight off rapidly, disillusion sets in because those goals aren't realised. This is despite the fact they were never weight-dependent in the first place.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

As well as expecting unrealistic benefits, dieters often try to lose far more weight than is reasonable. You could call it the *Biggest Loser* effect.

"Realistically, if you can lose 5 to 10 per cent and keep it off, you are doing very well," Brennan says. "That's enough to see improvements in health indicators. But most people go in trying to lose 20 to 30 per cent of their body weight. So one of the reasons people don't continue to put in the effort to maintain their achieved weight loss is because they never got to the point they hoped they would."

The compliments also start drying up as friends and family become used to your new look, further removing the incentive to maintain the weight loss.

And, if the psychological factors aren't enough, physiological changes conspire to make losing weight and keeping it off desperately difficult.

PHYSIOLOGICAL FACTORS

One recent Australian study, published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, looked at 50 overweight or obese adults who managed to lose about 13 kilograms using a low-calorie diet. Researchers found that the levels of many of the hormones that regulate appetite changed markedly, leaving the dieters feeling more hungry than ever. By the end of the study, most participants were well on the way to regaining the weight they had lost.

Another group of researchers, from the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York, found that when we starve ourselves, some of the neurons in the brain that stimulate hunger start to cannibalise each other, which, in turn, sends out more "hunger" signals.

There is also evidence to show your body reacts to sudden weight loss by slowing your metabolic rate by an even greater proportion.

QUICK FAILURE

So if diets don't work, why are we seduced time and again by the quick fix, confident that "this time, it will be different"?

Janette Gale is a health psychologist and founder of a company that trains doctors and others to better help people lose weight. She says that when dieters inevitably regain their lost weight, they rarely focus on the futility of quick-fix dieting.

"They will either blame themselves for not trying hard enough or they will say the diet is just not for them," she says. "But they will try the next one because it worked for so-and-so."

Superficially, each diet is different but health experts agree there are many more similarities than differences between them. While each diet might seem like a new strategy, in reality, it is the same old routine that is doomed to fail.

Each failure makes the next attempt even harder and less likely to succeed. All of which, of course, suits a diet industry that's constructed on failure and keeps the customers coming back.

Case study: Matthew Evans

Matthew Evans can't put his finger precisely on what made him finally do something about his weight at the age of 38.

At 140 kilograms, the computer programmer from St Leonards had visited his doctor on an unrelated matter. She pointed out that diabetes and heart disease were waiting around the corner if he didn't tackle his weight. She put him in touch with an **exercise physiologist, John Felton from The Exercise Clinic**.

"Perhaps it was the kick up the arse I needed," Evans says. "I had to go back and see him every few weeks and I had someone motivating me."

Starting off with gentle cycling sessions in the gym and walking at lunchtime, Evans's appetite for exercise and his ability gradually grew.

"I got better and better at cycling and did more and more walking in a shorter time until eventually I started running," he says.

He now runs about seven kilometres most days and has lost 40 kilograms in a year.

"I have lost weight before but not like this," he says. "I've always managed to put it back on again. I quite enjoy a few beers and a pizza and the lifestyle gets back to that."

A dietician put him on the right track with food but, he explains, it hasn't meant going without. "I'm not on a diet or anything like that. I've just changed what I buy in the supermarket to be a bit more healthy. Steamed veg, chicken and fish: stuff like that. I'm just eating more of the right things. Diets never worked for me."

He knows there is a risk of going back to the old ways but is confident his new habits are beginning to take hold. Habits such as running. Last year Evans completed the City2Surf in a very creditable 78 minutes.

"That's phenomenal compared to what I was doing a year ago," he says. "I started running because I wanted to lose weight but now I actually enjoy going out and doing it."

NICK GALVIN

The truth about real weight loss

At the heart of it, shedding kilograms is a simple, mathematical proposition: kilojoules in versus kilojoules out - create a deficit between these two and you will lose weight. But, of course, making it work is one of the hardest things you'll ever do.

That's what keeps the weight-loss scams in the business, promising the world but in the end only making your wallet thinner. But it's not hard to find credible advice, such as this from a fact sheet from the reputable Mayo Clinic: "The foundation of every successful weight-loss program remains a healthy, calorie-controlled diet combined with exercise. For successful, long-term weight loss, you must make permanent changes in your lifestyle and health habits."

No miracle cures, no wacky diets just sensible food and exercise. Boring but true.

The Mayo Clinic offers six strategies for successful, sustainable weight loss. Alongside making a commitment to yourself and being clear about your motivation, it recommends setting realistic goals. Losing between 500 grams and one kilogram a week over time is a sensible target. Healthy eating is another key strategy but, as the fact sheet explains, "decreasing calories need not mean giving up taste, satisfaction or ease of meal preparation".

Finally, there is exercise and a "change in perspective".

"It's not enough to eat healthy foods and exercise for only a few weeks or even months if you want long-term, successful weight loss," the clinic says. "These habits must become a way of life."