



Chapter 5

The Four-Letter Word:

The Role of “Diet” in Successful Weight Loss

“Diet” is today’s four-letter word. We use it about as frequently as some of our other “naughty” words. It used to be a normal word with no emotion associated with it: a neutral word. It was simply a description of our food patterns. Later, it actually was seen as a good word. It also came to mean a pattern of eating nutritious foods that led to health or weight loss. Before long, we started using “diet” to mean a food program specifically and intentionally used for losing weight. Diets became fads not much different from other fads, such as Beanie Babies, quiche, Pokémon, baggy pants, and expensive sneakers. There was the Atkins Diet, the Stillman Diet, the Rotation Diet, and the Grapefruit Diet, to name just a few. Some diets, like the Atkins high-protein diet, have made a comeback.

During the 1970s and 1980s — what I call “The Diet Era” — it was almost a status symbol to be on a diet to lose weight. “Oh, no, thank-you. I’m on a diet.” “Have you tried the Rotation Diet? It makes you lose a ton of weight!” Dieters would make these statements proudly as if their being on a diet meant they were being good, strong, and responsible. As Americans became more weight conscious, the more dieting became part of our lifestyle. That’s good, right?

In our case, it’s not a good thing. Many people believe that if something is good, then more is better. It’s usually not the case. Losing weight is good, right? It depends on how much we lose, how fast we lose, and its cost. Dieting surely is good. It depends on the



type of diet, the number of calories, the nutrients, how long the diet lasts, and what’s sacrificed for the sake of following the diet and losing weight.

It was during the “Diet Era” that eating disorders exploded into an epidemic. It was also during this time that Americans on the average started getting fatter — faster! We’ve ended up with the two extremes.

One of the costs to all of us is that “diet” is no longer a neutral word. “Diet” conjures up thoughts of deprivation, little enjoyment, cravings, having to eat things we don’t like, and not being able to eat foods we love. It brings on feelings of anxiety, frustration, resistance, fear, and maybe even anger. Today we still think we should be on a diet and we think it should be easy, but we cringe at the thought of dieting.

The truth is that strict dieting results in weight gain — the opposite of what we want. Of course, most dieters don’t know that the dieting is causing their weight gain. Instead, they believe themselves to be to blame because of their lack of control or discipline. Nothing could be further from the truth. The problem is with the diet and the brain’s reaction to it.

Your body and, particularly, your brain, are built to help you survive. In fact, the most important thing to your brain is to prevent your destruction. You don’t have to do much to survive physically; you’re essentially on “auto-pilot” most of the time. That leaves you free to relax and enjoy life; unless, that is, you interfere with your brain’s function to help you survive and, by dieting strictly, you get in its way.



The brain is an expert at knowing what your body needs. Someone who has never dieted has strong communication with his or her brain. If the brain registers that it needs something, it signals us to seek it.

For example, Jane has never been on a diet. She can't remember ever having to think much about food. If she felt like eating something, she ate it. Sometimes she'd feel like having meat, other times fruit would appeal to her. In the morning, she usually wanted something starchy and, at night, she'd feel like having something sweet. When she ate what she wanted, she quickly felt satisfied and went on to other things in her life.

Joyce, on the other hand, started trying diets when she was 15 years old. Usually the diets were low in calories and had many restrictions, particularly about what she could and could not eat. Joyce tried to stay away from some of her favorite foods, such as bread, sweets, and pizza, because she believed they were fattening. In order to stay on the diets, she had to watch what she ate carefully and make sure not to loosen up on any of the restrictions. She'd plan meals or skip them completely whenever possible. Only "diet" foods were allowed in her kitchen and when she had a craving for something, she would try to distract herself from it through any means possible. Despite all her efforts, the longer she was on the diet, the harder it was to stay on it.

Joyce became obsessed with food, sometimes even dreaming about it. She'd anticipate the next opportunity to eat but felt anxious, fearing she would lose control and break the diet. She felt hungry a lot but rarely felt completely satisfied after a meal. Joyce was familiar with what would happen if she let herself eat something she wasn't



supposed to eat. Lately, she had secretly been eating compulsively, and eating out with friends was too tempting and frustrating.

I could go on but it's probably clear. Jane's story is short: Jane wants pizza. Jane eats pizza. Jane feels satisfied. Jane continues to enjoy her life.

Joyce's story is long and doesn't have an ending. Joyce wants ice cream. Joyce doesn't eat ice cream. Joyce gets a stronger urge for ice cream. Joyce tries harder not to eat ice cream. Joyce can't get ice cream off her mind. Joyce tries like hell to avoid the ice cream. Joyce is nervous, afraid, and salivating like crazy. Joyce breaks down and eats a half-gallon of ice cream. Joyce feels guilty and mad at herself. Joyce gains weight. Joyce goes on another diet. Everything repeats.

When the brain is fed, it relaxes and focuses on other things. It needs fuel to function and food is its fuel. It can't afford to wait until the fuel tank is completely empty to sound the alarm. When it senses that it's not getting the amount of fuel it needs, it starts to send warnings. However, most people don't know how to read the brain's signals. When you're on a strict diet and you start thinking about food more or getting strong cravings, it's your brain trying to tell you to feed it. It may try to push you to eat particular types of foods if it's lacking in particular nutrients, like craving meat when your body needs some protein.

Most diets, though, are too low in calories to supply your body with the needed fuel. In these cases, the brain's goal is to get you to eat anything with calories. That's usually the foods with the most concentrated calorie-content fats. If your body is highly deprived



of calories, it's not going to waste its time trying to get you to eat an apple and some carrots. It's going to point you straight to the mud pie or the fried chicken.

Not knowing that the cravings are attempts from the brain to help, the dieter becomes afraid that she will lose control and break the diet. In an effort to prevent this, she tries harder to follow the diet instead of listening to what her body tells her. The harder she tries, the stronger the signals from her brain to eat. Usually, the brain wins and the dieter succumbs to the cravings or, depending on how long and to what degree she has deprived herself, she binges.

Let's take a closer look at Jane and Joyce's approaches to eating. Jane takes a casual, relaxed approach to her eating life. Her eating is naturally in control; she doesn't have to focus on it. Joyce is uptight about her eating and she sometimes binges. Which way is more likely to result in any weight loss?

Joyce's method can only lead to weight gain or an eating disorder (we will discuss eating disorders in more detail in Chapter 21). There's more. Joyce isn't happy. She's irritable, anxious, and frustrated. In short, she's not having much fun and the quality of her life is being compromised.

Dieting leads to deprivation. In turn, deprivation leads to the brain trying to protect the body by pushing it to eat. The longer the brain is deprived, the bigger the binge is going to be. The bigger and more frequent the binges, the greater the weight gain. It's a well-known fact that dieters usually regain more weight after stopping a diet than they lost while on the diet.



When control of food occurs, not because of a conscious decision to control, but because our body is in balance, we would say it is in “natural control.” Natural control looks like this: you sense you want something to eat (it could be due to hunger or just a yearning). You think of what specifically you want (let’s say, jelly beans) and allow yourself to have it. You get exactly what you want, jelly beans, and happily savor every mouthful. At some point, your brain sends a message, “I don’t want any more.” You stop eating and go on to something else.

When you’re in natural control, you don’t have to think much about eating. You go with the flow and let your brain direct you automatically. There’s no need to try to figure out when enough is enough. You let your brain be the guide — it’s the expert!

Trying to control eating leads to loss of control. What a “Catch-22!” That’s the way it is, though. It’s how we are wired. Humans know little about how the brain works, especially when we consider all its capabilities. It’s an amazing machine and we’re lucky to have it.

Unfortunately, too many people have needlessly suffered trying to follow the wrong advice about losing weight — blaming themselves when they fail at it. The good news is that it’s simple to regain natural control over food. We all have the ability for natural control of eating. After all, we weren’t born overeating. As babies, like with other animals, our brain told us when we needed food and we cried to communicate it. As we got older, we got better at communicating it until we were able to get our own food.