



SPECIAL CONTENT PACKAGE

Kripalu Approach to Healthy Weight

The Two Most Important Weight-Loss Tips

Lisa B. Nelson

I've spent the last 20 years studying the research on metabolism and weight loss, and working individually with hundreds and hundreds of people has allowed me to see firsthand what works and what doesn't.

Here is the most important thing I've learned: Do not try to lose weight simply by cutting down on calories. Calorie restriction causes our metabolism to slow down. While this seems unhelpful when we're trying to lose weight, from an evolutionary perspective it's actually quite adaptive. It's something our body has learned to do to help us get through periods of famine.

However, in our modern era, this phenomenon of calorie restriction slowing metabolism has resulted in the fact that almost everyone tends to regain what they lost on a calorie-restricted diet, and then some. This is the experience of most people I've worked with, and I suspect it will ring true for many of you, too. Here's a New York Times [article](#) about the contestants from The Biggest Loser, which prompted a round of media attention to this problem back in 2016.

But rapid weight loss followed by rapid weight gain doesn't have to happen. Here's what you need to know to avoid this:

1. Don't cut calories, unless it's a change you can keep up for the rest of your life. This is the difference between dieting (a verb, meaning something we do for a short period of time, only to return to prior habits) and changing our diet (noun, which means making a permanent change to what and how we eat). If you've cut down to an 1,800-calorie-a-day diet from 2,200, that's okay as long as you plan to eat only 1,800 calories pretty much forever. Some people really do that, and it can work; programs like WW can often help. But, if you do go back to 2,200 per day, you will gain it all back because your metabolism can no longer process that many calories effectively.



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2. Instead of cutting back on calories, cut back on carbs. Research has shown that people who lose weight by following a low-carb diet have less slowing of their metabolism than people on a low-fat diet. A 2018 study showed that people on a low-carb diet only had their metabolism slow down by 95 calories a day on average (and some people actually had a boost in metabolism, meaning they actually ate more). Those people on a low-fat (i.e., high-carb) diet burned 400 fewer calories per day than before they started dieting. That's a lot they couldn't eat anymore without gaining weight. For some people in the study, the number was closer to 600 calories less. That's an entire meal they could no longer eat without gaining weight.


I get very discouraged when I hear doctors and nutritionists say, "A calorie is a calorie—just cut down," because it isn't true physiologically at all. One hundred calories of Coke has a very different impact on our blood sugar and insulin than 100 calories of kale or almonds, and this has profound implications on our tendency to gain or lose weight, as well as our risk of developing conditions like high blood pressure and diabetes.

So go for less sugar and fewer refined carbs, such as cereals, cookies, bread, pasta, crackers, etc. And no sugar in your beverages helps a huge amount. Bottom line: Change what you eat more than how much.

[!\[\]\(99f58673407353e96a019fbca558fd72_img.jpg\) The Kripalu Approach to Healthy Weight: Online Edition](#)

The logo for Kripalu, featuring the word "Kripalu" in a white, sans-serif font centered within a solid orange square.

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No Shame

Just how prevalent is fat shaming? In a study published in the *Journal of Health Psychology*, 50 women were asked to keep a diary for one week, documenting every time they were insulted, humiliated, or bullied because of their size. The results: 1,077 instances when people's reactions made the women feel "less than."

Most of us know from personal experience that humiliation can lead to demoralization. When we feel devalued, that can hamper healthy change. And it's even worse when we talk to ourselves negatively. Acceptance and appreciation appear to be much more powerful catalysts to making positive shifts: Research shows that loving-kindness meditation—the practice of sending love to others or to oneself—is linked to greater life satisfaction, including better relationships and better health.

There's a growing movement to counteract all the trash talk around weight, as evidenced by groups such as the Yoga and Body Image Coalition, whose mission is to support yoga that acknowledges and reflects diversity and "challenges industry leaders and media creators to expand their vision of what a yogi looks like."

That's a worthy goal—but one that we can't wait around for. Change, as the Buddha said, must come from within.

"Lasting, positive change around eating habits and weight comes from self-acceptance—radical compassion plus right action," says Kripalu faculty member Aruni Nan Futuronsky. "Without that, you're simply modifying behavior, and nothing changes."

What doesn't work, according to Aruni? Diets. Willpower. Pressure from family and friends.

What does work? Small, incremental modifications inspired by a desire to feel better, not look better.



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“One small shift practiced over time is really the route of transformation,” says Kripalu Lead Nutritionist Annie B. Kay. That could be as simple as getting outside more, taking a few minutes each day to breathe deeply and consciously, or connecting more with people you love. Notice—none of those things are related to food.

“It’s not about the food,” Aruni says. “It’s about asking yourself what you really need. Where else can you give yourself sweetness?”

Sometimes, dropping pounds isn’t even part of the equation—what people lose instead is the weight of shame and guilt.

“It is possible to be obese and healthy,” says Annie. “It’s the habits, not the number on the scale.”

Lisa Nelson, MD, Director of Medical Education at Kripalu, says that while there is a correlation between obesity (especially the obesity associated with metabolic syndrome, which is on the rise in the United States and globally) and chronic disease, there are individuals who are obese while still remaining metabolically healthy. That means they don’t have the biomarkers associated with chronic disease, such as insulin resistance and elevated blood sugar, CRP, triglycerides, and LDL cholesterol levels.

“I would also broaden our notion of health to include emotional, spiritual, and mental health,” Lisa says. “Aside from the numbers on the scale, it’s also how we feel on the inside. Vibrant? Energized? Self-compassionate? This sense of well-being is influenced by our habits—such as eating whole foods, moving our bodies in joyful ways, meditation—in the same ways that our weight is. So moving toward health will impact well-being from the inside out, whether we come down to a normal BMI or not.”

If you struggle with maintaining healthy eating habits, Annie recommends starting with one simple, powerful change: Stop feeling bad about what you’re eating, and just enjoy it. You will be amazed, she says, at where that first step will lead you. Bottom line, says Aruni: “A healthy person is a person who’s comfortable in their body.”





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The Science of Willpower

Lisa B. Nelson

I saw a lovely young woman, whom I'll call Cathy, in my office this week. She was there to discuss her inability to lose weight. After discussing the basics—and benefits—of a whole-foods diet, I recommended she meet regularly with a nutritionist. She shrugged and said, “My problem is willpower. I don't have any—never did. That's why I am the way I am.”

Cathy spoke about willpower as if it were a fixed entity, like her brown eyes or thick hair. The notion that willpower is a fluid state, a practice, or skill that she could freely develop was completely foreign to her. To help nudge her out of this misperception, I recommended the book *The Willpower Instinct*, by health psychologist Kelly McGonigal.

As a holistic health professional, I always feel relieved when books that hit the popular press actually support meaningful, evidence-based, mindful health practices. In addition to being a PhD who lectures at Stanford University, McGonigal is a longtime yogi and meditator. This book, subtitled *How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It*, is an artful introduction to the science and practice of mindful awareness. It's also an accessible exploration of the neurobiology behind behavior change, explaining how breath, exercise, and thought patterns actually change the structure and functioning of the brain.

For instance, recent studies demonstrate how meditation increases activity in the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for helping us maintain self-control. With just a few weeks of sustained practice, marked changes were visible in the actual structure and size of participants' gray matter. Another study showed marked differences in brain activation in recently-trained meditators versus seasoned practitioners, showing that, indeed, practice makes perfect.

So for those of us like Cathy, who want to shift our patterns, but fear we lack the necessary willpower, the news is clear: Mindful effort, practiced over time, will bring us the change that we desire.



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What is mindful living?

Living mindfully develops our basic capacity to be aware—to direct our attention to the present moment—to interrupt automatic reactions and, most importantly, to release negative self-judgment.

What is mindful eating?

Mindful eating is a meditation practice in which the tastes and the textures of food become the gentle anchor that return our minds back to the present moment.

What are the benefits of mindful eating?

- Aligns us with the wisdom of the body
- Realigns us to our body's signals
- Returns deliciousness and satisfaction to eating
- Strengthens the Witness
- Creates the option for choice, for new behavior

How to Practice

- Breathe and relax
- Set an intention to be present
- Slow down the eating process
- Chew thoroughly and non-habitually
- Make the mindful decision to swallow
- Eat with all your senses
- Savor tastes and textures

Practicing Self-Observation Without Judgment, we become able to be present for the taste and texture of food, continually returning to the sensations as doorways into the moment.

