

Forget About Willpower

The real secret to sticking to your New Year's resolutions is knowing *why* you want to lose weight and live healthier. Fear of dying is not sustainable; joy of living is.

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I went to a holiday party last night and saw a friend I hadn't seen in a while.

"Hey, Woody—you look great! How did you manage to lose so much weight?"

"Well, I tried something radical: I'm eating less food. I realized that I liked looking good and feeling good more than I liked eating extra food. I found that I was eating a lot when I felt depressed or stressed or lonely, so I decided to find other ways of managing stress and being with people I love that weren't centered around eating too much."

I've been conducting clinical research for over 30 years. In the process I've learned what really works to make and maintain lasting changes in diet and lifestyle. Woody got it right.

So, maybe you're a little stuffed from holiday indulgences. OK, *really* stuffed. Perhaps you look in the mirror and don't like what you see. You're ready to make some New Year's resolutions, but you're not optimistic that this year is going to be any different. Many people believe that it takes willpower to achieve such goals. "I resolve to eat less food" sounds good in theory, but it's often hard to sustain. And if you believe that it's all willpower, then you're likely to be upset with yourself if you don't succeed.

Willpower alone is not sustainable. Pleasure is. Deprivation is not sustainable. Abundance is. Pain is not sustainable. Ecstasy is. Fear of dying is not sustainable. Joy of living is. If we view changing our diet and lifestyle as deprivation and sacrifice, well, forget about it. You might be able to force yourself to make some changes for a limited period of time, but long-term success will elude you.

The language of behavioral modification often has a moralistic quality to it that turns off a lot of people (like "cheating" on a diet). It's a small step from thinking of foods as "good" or "bad" to seeing yourself as a "good person" or a "bad person" if you eat them—gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins. For example, once you feel that you're a bad person for eating some ice cream, it's all too easy to say, "Well, I blew it, so I might as well finish the entire pint." In reality, although we often project moral qualities onto it, food is just food.

Also, the term "compliance" has a creepy, fascist quality to it, one person manipulating or bending another person to his or her will. In the short run I may be able to pressure you into changing your diet, but sooner or later (usually sooner), some part of you will rebel. The same is often true if we try to use willpower to pressure ourselves into changing what we eat and how we live—we may rebel against ourselves.

Instead, if we understand that *what we gain is so much more than what we give up*, then it doesn't feel like a sacrifice. We can see lifestyle choices as an opportunity to transform our lives in ways that make us feel more joyful. If it's fun, then it's sustainable.

In Woody's case, he found that he liked looking and feeling better more than he liked eating too much food. For others, their desire to stay healthy long enough to dance at their child's wedding is a sustainable motivator. If a spouse says, "Darling, I love you so much and can't bear the thought of life without you. Please live a healthier lifestyle so we can enjoy each other longer and better," well, that works. I'm not someone who loves to exercise, so I keep a picture of my beloved wife and son over my elliptical trainer (and on my refrigerator). Love is more powerful than willpower.

If you go *on* a diet, chances are you'll go *off* a diet. Sooner or later. For most people, being on a diet—any diet—is not sustainable. Even the word "diet" conjures up feeling restricted, deprived, controlled. Instead, what you actually have is a full spectrum of nutrition and lifestyle choices. It's not all or nothing. This approach is all about freedom and choice. There is no diet to get on and no diet to get off. Nothing is forbidden. No "Thou Shalt Nots," no "You Better!" No guilt, no shame; no right, no wrong.

What matters most is your *overall* way of eating and living. If you indulge yourself one day, it doesn't mean you got off your diet. Just eat more healthfully the next day. If you're a couch potato one day, exercise a little more the next. If you don't have time to meditate for 20 minutes, do it for one minute—the consistency is more important than the duration. Then you're less likely to feel restricted. Studies have shown that those who eat the healthiest overall are the ones who allow themselves some indulgences. People have different needs, goals and preferences.

I describe many of these ideas in greater detail in my forthcoming book, "[The Spectrum](#)." In this book I categorize foods from the most healthful to the least healthful and describe how to personalize a way of eating, exercising, and managing stress that is just right for you.

How much you want to move to the healthier end of the spectrum, and how quickly, is up to you. To the degree that you move in a healthful direction along this spectrum, you're likely to look better, feel better, lose weight and gain health.

One of my favorite movies, "Chocolat," put it best: "Listen, here's what I think. I think we can't go around measuring our goodness by what we *don't* do. By what we deny ourselves. What we resist and who we exclude. I think we've got to measure goodness by what we embrace, what we create, and who we include."

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