

CHAPTER TWO

THE MYTH OF WILLPOWER

YOU DON'T FAIL DIETS—THEY FAIL YOU

9 Surefire Ways to Sabotage Your Weight Loss

1. Rely on willpower

Even if you're one of those people with an iron will, no one can hold out forever. Willpower is notoriously unreliable, and if you're ever sleepy, hungry, tipsy, grumpy, sad, happy, lazy, or all of the above, your weakness will eventually win.

2. Forget the difference between temporary and permanent

Is your goal to fit into a size 4? Almost anyone can get there by following a strict enough diet and workout regimen for a set amount of time. The question is, how long do you want to stay there? If your goals are intended to be permanent, your dietary and fitness modifications need to be as well.

3. Start a really hard workout regimen

Having someone kick your ass in boot camp may sound like what you need to get in shape, but how long do you really think you will subject yourself to pain and suffering before you give up on exercise completely? Most people don't last two months.

4. Never learn to eat mindfully

One of the biggest differences between American culture and those of less obese nations (e.g., France) is our complete and utter lack of food culture. In healthier cultures, mealtime is an important event when people gather to share good food and stories from the day. With these habits come standards for portion sizes, eating speed, and nutritional balance.

Sadly, it's unlikely the United States will suddenly establish a healthy food culture in time to help the majority of the population. But you can get a lot of the benefits yourself by learning to eat mindfully (see chapter 7). Mindful eating helps you slow down, savor your food, and appreciate each bite. For these reasons it is incredibly effective at helping with portion control—without leaving you feeling deprived.

In our culture, mindful eating is very difficult and takes some practice. It's hard to slow down when your friends are wolfing down food by the handful. But it is possible. Practice when you're alone, and it will be easier when you're with friends.

5. Ignore how much you miss your favorite foods

Love ice cream? Can you go your entire life without it? What about six months? Or do you just plan to hold out as long as you can before the next inevitable binge? Cold turkey isn't necessary if you develop a healthy relationship with your favorite treats.

6. Assume that what worked for someone else will work for you

Have a friend who lost a ton of weight on the Atkins diet? Me too. I also have friends who lost weight doing the Master Cleanse or going vegan. Typically only the ones who make permanent habit changes can maintain it, so a plan that works for someone else will only work for you if you enjoy it and can incorporate it into your life. Everyone is different.

7. Dramatically restrict your eating

Starving is not fun. Nor are cravings. Nor is malnutrition. Limiting your calories to unrealistic lows is a great way to begin the cycle of yo-yo dieting that we all know and love. Enjoy!

8. Don't find deeper purpose in what and why you eat

This one may sound a bit esoteric, but bear with me. If the goal is to build healthy habits (which it should be), the people who have the most success are those who want to achieve more than a change in their appearance. Vegans believe so deeply that harming animals is wrong that they never stray from their diets. Locavores want to know and trace the source of all their foods. For some people, being told they will die if they do not change their habits is enough.

For myself, it's good to know that my habits are healthy and effective, but I've come to understand that how I eat is a way of life that has a deeper political, philosophical, and environmental impact than I ever imagined. It's also super tasty. For inspiration, check out

the film *Food, Inc.* or read *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, by Michael Pollan.⁶ You won't regret it.

9. Pick a diet that is super inconvenient

We all have our limits on how far we'll go to stick to an eating plan. Be sure to know yours. If you're too busy (or have too many taste buds) to eat a specific combination of foods every three hours—I know I couldn't—then don't pretend you can. Pick dietary changes you can handle; the little things do add up if you can maintain them for the long haul.