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RESTRICTED SUCCESS

BY HILARY ACHAUER

Experts says sensible eating and regular activity
trump restrictive diets that often result in failure.

Starting a new diet can be thrilling.

It's a time of hope and possibility. The process often starts with a trip to the drugstore for a notebook to write down the details of every meal. Then it's off to the grocery store to fill the cart with strange ingredients such as chia seeds and apple-cider vinegar. Next, a post on Facebook and Instagram to let everyone know it's Day 1 of your new diet. Through willpower and perfect eating habits, you are going to get the body of your dreams, at which point you'll move on to other things.

And then, a year later, you find yourself exactly where you started. Or maybe a few pounds heavier, filled with disappointment.

If you've ever experienced this scenario, you're not alone. And it's not your fault.

In her new book "Secrets From the Eating Lab: The Science of Weight Loss, the Myth of Willpower, and Why You Should Never Diet Again," Traci Mann, professor of psychology at the University of Minnesota, shares her findings after 20 years of research. She discovered restrictive diets don't work, often result in weight gain and might ultimately be unhealthy. What's more, losing weight is not a matter of willpower. When we diet, we are fighting against our brains and our biology.

All this doesn't mean we should sink into a torpor surrounded by potato chips and ice cream. Instead of riding the roller coaster of restrictive diets, Mann recommends adopting healthy eating habits, exercising and—most importantly—being happy with your leanest livable weight.

Sound familiar?

Diets Work—Until They Don't

We are repeatedly tricked into starting restrictive diets for one reason: They all work—at first.

"Since the 1940s, hundreds of studies have shown that dieters lose an average of five to fifteen pounds over the first four to six months on a diet," Mann wrote in "Secrets From the Eating Lab" (4).

No matter the diet—whether it comes from a scientist or a celebrity—most people lose weight at the beginning.

New diets often start with intensity
but end with ice cream, doing
little for long-term health.





Dave Fer/CrossFit Journal

The brain can alter its response to food, and if you're on a restrictive diet, a pair of peppers might pale in comparison to a pepperoni pizza.

The problem occurs after this honeymoon period. First, people don't lose enough weight. Second, they don't keep it off.

"The most rigorous diet studies find that about half of dieters will weigh more four to five years after the diet ends than they did at the start of the diet," Mann wrote (4). Even worse, she said this is a low estimate of diet failure because it comes from studies biased toward showing diets work.

Stretching back more than 20 years, study after study shows restrictive diets don't lead to long-term weight loss (3).

Why, then, do people keep dieting even with dismal long-term results?

As former Weight Watchers finance director Richard Samber put it, dieting is like playing the lottery.

"If you don't win, you play it again. Maybe you'll win a second time," he said in the BBC documentary "The Men Who Made Us Thin: Part 1."

In the documentary, Samber was asked how he could have a successful business if only 16 percent maintained their weight loss.

"It's successful because the other 84 percent have to come back and do it again. That's where your business comes from," Samber said.

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The reason diets fail is not a matter of willpower or a personal failing on your part. It's biology.

If you have a relatively healthy lifestyle—you exercise and eat well consistently—you've probably noticed your body settles into a consistent weight. The number may fluctuate 5 or 10 lb. either way, but it's most likely fairly stable.

If your stable weight means you have the abs of Margaux Alvarez or the pecs of Rich Froning, this is great news. If, however, you look in the mirror and don't see the physique of a CrossFit Games athlete, you might come to the conclusion it's time for a restrictive diet.

Mann wrote that this is a mistake.

"Your body uses many biological tricks to defend your set range, particularly if you get below it, because this is when your body thinks you are starving to death," she wrote (4).

Most people are aware restrictive diets slow the metabolism, which means it takes longer for your body to convert what you eat and drink into energy, but this is only one of the physiological effects caused by severely cutting calories.

When you're dieting, if it seems as if delicious food is everywhere, it's not your imagination. When you're hungry from dieting, your brain responds differently to food, causing you to pay more attention to food when you find it and making it look even more delicious and tempting than usual (8).

The brain also responds to hunger and starvation by reducing activity in the prefrontal cortex, the part of your brain that helps you make decisions and resist impulses (6). This means restrictive diets cause you to notice food more and become less able to resist tempting treats.

Losing weight results in a loss in body fat, which most people consider a good thing. However, body fat is a part of the endocrine system, producing hormones involved in the sensations of hunger and fullness. Less body fat means there are less of the hormones that make you feel full (leptin) and more of the hormones that make you hungry (ghrelin).

"One study found that these changes in hormone levels were still detectable in people a year after they started dieting," Mann wrote, referencing an article from the New England Journal of Medicine (9).

Most people are aware of the role stress plays in weight gain. Stress causes the body to release cortisol, and cortisol makes energy available in your bloodstream in the form of glucose. That's helpful if you're a cave person who needs to flee a predator, but if work deadlines or bills cause your stress, the result will often be fat, stored in your belly. This is because cortisol affects where fat is stored. People with elevated cortisol store fat centrally, [around their organs](#). Stress also causes many people to overeat, exercise less and sleep less.

In a frustrating catch-22, the study "Low Calorie Dieting Increases Cortisol" revealed that cortisol levels in dieters' saliva showed the act of restricting calories led to a stress response (10).

"It's not just that people should try to avoid stress while dieting," Mann wrote (4). "It's that stress *cannot be avoided when you are dieting*, because dieting itself causes stress. Dieting causes the stress response that has already been shown to lead to weight gain" (italics hers).

What to Do?

Does all this depressing science mean we should give up and dive headfirst into a box of doughnuts?

No. Remember that Mann's research focuses on restrictive, short-term programs that require the participant to be hungry and deprived.

There is a way to eat healthy and not feel deprived, to feel good and maintain a stable weight. In a nutshell, that prescription looks a lot like CrossFit's original nutrition directive, stated simply in the opening lines of "World-Class Fitness in 100 Words" by CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman: "Eat meat and vegetables, nuts and seeds, some fruit, little starch and no sugar. Keep intake to levels that will support exercise but not body fat."

How does that prescription look in practice in the real world?

Annie Michel is a 59-year-old trainer at CrossFit Beacon in Portland, Maine. She's been doing CrossFit for five years, and she competed in the Masters Women 55-59 Division at the CrossFit Games in 2012, when she took second, and in 2013, when she placed eighth.

Michel was always athletic, but after raising four children and putting their activities before her own, she gained weight.

“I didn’t get out enough with (my kids). I snacked with them. I was always active with them, but it was not the same. I ate the way the (food) pyramid told me to eat and never lost any weight. I was heavy and would go up and down 10 lb.,” Michel said, referencing U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines for healthy eating published in 1992 (the pyramid has since been updated to a plate).

She resigned herself to being active but heavy until she started CrossFit in May 2010.

“I connected with the athlete in me the day I walked through the door,” Michel said. “Within a month I dropped 20 lb., just eliminating grains and being in a different mindset and (using) portion control.”

Then, she said, her weight stopped being the focus. She just wanted to move better.

“I think within the first year I dropped 35 lb. I happened to be good at (CrossFit),” Michel said.

She said she follows a version of Mark Sisson’s 80/20 Principle, outlined on the “primal living” site [Mark’s Daily Apple](#): It’s unrealistic to eat perfectly 100 percent of the time. If you eat well 80 percent of the time, that’s good enough.

“If I want to go out and have an ice-cream sundae at our local place once in a while, I will,” Michel said. “I really subscribe to that.”

“The biggest thing is I try to stay away from sugar as much as possible. I don’t eat a ton of grains. Once in a while I’ll have some pizza,” Michel said.

Now that she’s taking a break from training for the Games, Michel said she has to keep an eye on portion control.

“Am I eating enough—but the right things?” Michel said she wonders.

Michel beat the statistics by keeping her weight off for five years. She did it by taking a long-term, sustainable approach—focusing on a way of eating that will last a lifetime, not for the length of the latest diet. She reinforced that plan with fitness.



Thomas Campitelli/CrossFit Journal

Two-time CrossFit Games competitor Annie Michel said she found success maintaining her weight through lifestyle changes, and suddenly her focus shifted to performance.

She said she’s up about 6 or 8 lb. from where she’d like to be, but she isn’t planning any drastic diets to try to lose that small amount of weight.

“It’s really quite interesting how I’m able to just eat and not think about what I eat and eat a lot and enjoy it,” she said.

Her No. 1 rule: “Don’t have the crap in the house,” Michel said. She also said she’s changed her perspective on what constitutes a treat.

“There’s nothing more satisfying to me than some celery and cashew butter. It’s like my candy,” Michel said.

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—Annie Michel



Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

Start simple: Eliminating empty calories from added sugars can have dramatic effects on the body and metabolism.

Michel encourages everyone to become label readers as a way to avoid those sneaky, sugar-laden foods.

“Sugar is everywhere in every food,” Michel said. To avoid sneaky sources of sugar, Michel stopped taking sugar in her coffee and said she’s wary of “healthy” desserts that contain a lot of sugar.

Knowing that sugar can appear unexpectedly means Michel can avoid it most of the time and really enjoy the treats when she chooses to indulge.

“I know that there are naturally going to be imperfections in all areas of my life,” Michel said.

Michel trains about five to six days per week, with one of those days being an activity outside the gym: a long paddle in a kayak, a bike ride or a three-hour gardening session.

Julie Goffena, 51, has also managed to maintain a consistent weight. She started CrossFit at Practice CrossFit in Troy, Ohio, the same year as Michel—2010. Goffena was active as an adult, but the former gymnast and cheerleader was bored with her exercise routine at the local YMCA.

“I walked into (Practice CrossFit), and I knew immediately that there was no turning back for me,” Goffena said.

Goffena, who drives 30 minutes each way to her affiliate, works out about four to five times a week.

“My weight really hasn’t fluctuated or changed over the years. I’ve experimented with different diets and food trends over the years. Some were weird—like the cabbage-soup diet—for a day. I have been fortunate because I’ve always been active. It hasn’t been a fight for me, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t always been healthy—that whole ‘skinny fat’ thing,” she said.

Goffena follows the Paleo Diet, which she said was an adjustment at first.

“It was absolutely opposite of everything we are taught. I always thought plenty of fruits and grains and avoid all fat was the way to go. ... It took me a while to get on board,” she said.

Like Michel, Goffena doesn’t try to be perfect at all times.

“I am going to have a few cheats here or there, or if my husband invites me to the local ice-cream parlor ... I’m always going to say yes to that. But I can get right back (to healthy eating),” she said.

The best part about the diet she follows, Goffena said, is that it isn’t restrictive.

“I never feel ‘hangry.’ I don’t feel like that. I don’t feel like I’m being held captive to the diet in any way at all,” she said.

“Keep it simple but don’t
be weird over it.”

—Julie Goffena

She avoids processed sugars and makes an effort to measure her protein with a food scale to control her portions.

“I eat two large meals a day, and then I supplement in between those with bars and shakes and things like that,” Goffena said.



Courtesy of Julie Goffena

Julie Goffena follows the Paleo Diet but doesn’t find it restrictive. She simply makes healthy choices most of the time and stays active.

“I’ve kept a steady weight. But I look different. I have the muscle separation now. I look like I have muscles, which is really hard to attain when you’re in your 50s. You really have to fight for that. CrossFit and following a Paleo-type diet has made that possible for me,” Goffena said.

“You know, keep it simple but don’t be weird over it. It shouldn’t be your focus. I don’t want to sit around and talk about food all the time. Food is food and I’m gonna eat it because I need to. I like having the freedom from it,” Goffena said.

The Importance of Exercise and Healthy Hacks

What role does exercise play in weight loss? Many people begin an exercise program simply to lose weight, but as The New York Times reported in the 2012 article “[Dieting vs. Exercise for Weight Loss](#),” “Even active people will pack on pounds if they eat like most of us in the West. The underlying and rather disheartening message of that finding, of course, is that physical activity by itself is not going to make and keep you thin.”



Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

Healthy eating can include weighing and measuring to add precision, and intake can be altered to find the exact amounts that produce the best results for each individual.

This does not mean you should forgo exercise. The benefits of regular physical activity are broad and varied. Working out does many wonderful things for your health, and it’s likely to keep you alive longer.

A review of 305 randomized clinical trials found exercise was just as effective as drugs in preventing death among people with heart disease, stroke and prediabetes (5). Exercise helps relieve stress and anxiety (7) and can have long-term cognitive benefits (2).

However, an hour of sweating can’t make up for poor nutrition, just like a week-long cleanse or a month-long nutrition challenge is not the way to maintain a healthy weight for the long term. It’s becoming apparent that a two-pronged approach to lifestyle is required: a healthy diet and regular exercise (1).

With that in mind, it’s not surprising CrossFit’s basic diet prescription produces great results in many cases. Any affiliate in the world can point to a collection of formerly sedentary individuals who adjusted their diets and added exercise to achieve dramatic improvements in health. Similarly, active people who improve poor diets often see dramatic improvements in athletic

performance as they “get both oars in the water,” so to speak. Of course, the basic diet plan can be fine tuned for each individual, and CrossFit recommends experimentation and research as each athlete works to find the ideal prescription.

For those who are committed to eating high-quality, unprocessed food and avoiding sugar, there are a few simple tricks to keep unhealthy snacks at bay and portions reasonable.

Brian Wansink, head of Cornell’s Food & Brand Lab and author of the book “*Mindless Eating*,” suggests using a smaller plate. A small plate filled to the edges looks to our brain to contain more food than a larger plate containing the same amount (11).

In “*Secrets From the Eating Lab*,” Mann listed several additional suggestions gathered during her research. Make fruits and vegetables easier to access by keeping a supply of cut-up vegetables in the fridge, and eat your salad or vegetables first. Don’t deprive yourself of other food; just start out with the produce. This will help you fill up on the healthiest part of your meal, the one thing on your plate you can generally eat with abandon. By the time you get to the rest of your plate you’ll be less hungry and less likely to overeat.



Many athletes have found that after a period of weighing and measuring, they're able to quickly eyeball appropriate quantities and easily prepare healthy, delicious meals.

Mann suggested other simple tricks to make it harder to ingest junk food. Don't keep the food in the house, and avoid driving by your favorite bakery or doughnut shop. Set up your life so the healthy choices are the easy choices. Surround yourself with healthy eaters.

You may have noticed when you're out to dinner with a bunch of health-conscious CrossFit athletes, most people order similarly. But once someone relents and starts in on the bread basket or picks up the dessert menu, the rest of the group often falls like dominoes.

We Are Not Our Abs

If you're able to consistently follow all the steps listed above—avoid restrictive diets; eat healthy, unprocessed food; exercise regularly—there's one final step. And it's probably the most difficult of all.

Learn to be OK with your body.

The most striking paragraph in Mann's book references "The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls" by historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg. In the book, Brumberg studied diaries of young women in the 1890s and discovered their journals were filled with concern about their character.

"They wrote about striving to be kinder and more concerned for others, working harder in school, and rejecting frivolity," Mann wrote (4).

Brumberg looked at diaries from the same age group in the 1990s and found the girls were still preoccupied with self-improvement—with a focus on their physical appearance, not their character. The path to improving their appearance almost always involved buying something.

Achieving good health and improving fitness are worthwhile goals, but it's easy to get caught in the weeds of chasing a body type you were never meant to have. Even looking at the fittest humans on the Earth—the CrossFit Games athletes—you'll see a range of body types, and all of them are tremendously functional. Walk into any affiliate and you'll see a wider range,

but you'll still find functional people who are training hard and generally supporting that training with good nutrition.

Pursue good health and fitness, but not at the expense of enjoying your life. Seek balance, not obsession. Don't get sucked into the latest diet fad promising perfection. Value happiness and equanimity over a perfectly shredded physique. When in doubt, "Eat meat and vegetables, nuts and seeds, some fruit, little starch and no sugar. Keep intake to levels that will support exercise but not body fat."

And switch to smaller dinner plates. ■

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