



by Lee Kern, MSW, LCSW

Weight Loss Stories & Lessons

Essential lessons about
successful weight control.

From Bible stories to bedtime stories, stories pass on essential knowledge and values for effective living. They can inspire, challenge, encourage, reassure, and inform. As a psycho-therapist working in a weight control treatment center, my clients share stories of triumph, disappointment, insight, loss, recovery, and mastery. Some of these stories capture essential lessons about successful weight control, and in this article, I will pass a few of these gems on to you.

Sarah: PUT WEIGHTS IN PERSPECTIVE

Many dieters feel like giving up when, after a day of eating right and exercising, there is no weight loss the next day. This frustration may be the result of the failure to put weights into perspective.

Sarah showed me her weight chart, on which she graphed daily weights. In nine months, she had lost 30 pounds. Each weight was a dot on the chart, and those 270 dots clustered together to form a worm like shape that slowly sloped down the page from high on the left to low on the right. Sarah acknowledged that there were many days when her weight spiked up, and there were also periods of plateaus, but the vision of dots forming a long-term trend downward was always reassuring of progress.

Lesson: Weigh regularly, plot the weights, and keep the big picture in mind.

Bob: AVOID AND PLAN FOR RISK

In the year and a half since I last saw him, Bob had lost over 100 pounds. I asked him how he did it and he said, "I had almost every meal in a restaurant." This was not something I had recommended and I could not think of any professional who would. But, he reminded me of our conversations about high risk situations, which he took to heart. Bob, a busy lawyer who lived by himself in a major city, decided his recovery would be at risk if he kept food in his apartment. Other than diet sodas in the refrigerator, he kept his home free of temptation, and ate his meals in restaurants.

His restaurant strategy was a critical part of his success. He identified safe meals for each restaurant in the neighborhood, wrote each meal on a 3x5 card, ordering from the card instead of looking at menus. This combination of strategies led to the major weight loss.

Lesson: Know what situations put your recovery at risk. Avoid them when possible, and when dealing with them, have a plan that keeps you safe.

Gloria: FOCUS ON SELF-CARE

After a period of abstinence from bingeing, Gloria's episodes of emotional eating were becoming more frequent. We spent time exploring the dynamics of the relapse. She was a typical "caretaker" - pleasing and worrying about everyone else, and rarely engaged in any rewarding or nurturing of herself. Within that impoverished emotional context, food had

become her method of nurturing. She recognized how self-defeating this was and agreed to establish a behavioral plan to counter it. She made a list of a variety of positive self-care activities, and posted it on the refrigerator. The list included daily inspirational reading, weekly nail or hair appointments, and occasional symphony or opera tickets. As she became more diligent in treating herself to these healthy pleasures, the binges and emotional eating episodes diminished.

Lesson: An infrastructure of positive self-nurturance and healthy pleasures facilitates letting go of self-defeating uses of food.

Charles: FEAR NOT HUNGER

After six weeks on a program of eating three healthy meals a day and not snacking, Charles had lost 20 pounds. His previous diets had been based on the philosophy that random urges should be satisfied by eating a small snack. In contrast, he learned from the three meal/no snack approach that hunger moments can be brief and fleeting, that he could easily wait until the next planned meal to eat. The extra snack calories were eliminated, facilitating his weight loss. He concluded that the old diets had induced a fear of urges and the snacks were a way to give in to them.

Lesson: Urge or hunger moments are not a crisis. If we give them a chance, they will fade. Urges are like waves; they can be surfed.

Frank: EXAMINE THE ATTACHMENT TO WEIGHT

Frank, a tall and hefty businessman, was proud of his management success. His staff admired and respected him, and he enjoyed the sense of authority he had at the company. Elevated blood pressure and cholesterol motivated him to join a weight control program, and after a 60-pound loss, he began to feel anxious about his job performance. He was nervous that his weight loss success had rendered him less physically intimidating with his staff, and thus less effective as a manager. It became clear that at a subconscious level Frank was depending on his weight to help foster his power as a supervisor. He decided to attend a workshop on effective management strategies. As his skills grew, he became less concerned that losing the weight meant a loss of authority.

Lesson: Weight may perform important hidden functions, such as providing protection, power, or an excuse. Losing the weight is an opportunity to examine the underlying weight attachment and develop mechanisms for replacing it.

Eliza: CHANGE THE LIFESTYLE

While employed in one city over a 10-year period, Eliza developed close friendships with three women. The four women often traveled together and enjoyed each other's company. Over time, due to work and family obligations, they each relocated to different cities. But, every four months they reunited and spent the majority of their time sampling new restaurants. Slowly, Eliza came to accept that this kind of food centric socializing was inconsistent with her desire to lose weight. She proposed to her friends that they replace some of the restaurant time with active interests they could enjoy together. As the get-togethers shifted to healthy home cooked meals and enjoyable hikes, all four women benefited from the changes.

Lesson: Lifestyle change is fundamental to success. Identify aspects of your lifestyle that promote weight gain and look for positive replacements.

Olivia: SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF

Olivia was frustrated. Over several months, she had made productive lifestyle changes. She joined the medical auxiliary, made some new friends, and was walking with a neighbor. But her weight was stuck in a long plateau, and she complained to me: "Lee, you said if I changed my lifestyle I would keep losing weight." I pointed out that she was not doing any self-monitoring, and as a result, she was likely eating a lot more than she thought. She needed to attend to the nuts and bolts of weight control: plan meals, count calories, make grocery store lists, weigh regularly, track the weights, record everything she eats, and reduce fat, sodium and sweets in the diet. She took me up on these suggestions, broke through the plateau, and was well on the way to her goal weight.

Lesson: Don't forget the details – use self-monitoring to keep yourself honest and make changes to diet content and eating patterns.

Annie: BREAK THE LINKS

The sequence of Annie's binges was highly predictable: 1. While at work she fantasizes about food and plans that night's binge. 2. After work she makes several stops to purchase the binge foods. 3. She brings the foods into the house and puts them on the living room coffee table. 4. She goes into the bedroom to take off her business suit and puts on comfortable, loose fitting clothes. 5. She returns to the living room, turns on the TV, sits on the couch, and proceeds to zone out with food over the next hour.

I explained to her that each step functions as a link in a complex chain of behavior, and that sometimes breaking one link may be enough to alter the pattern. I suggested that the next night she keep her work clothes on rather than to change into her binge clothes. At the next session, she reported that the binges had been less frequent and less severe, that it was uncomfortable to binge when dressed up. The ritual was disrupted; she was more conscious about her choices and decided to change the routine.

Lesson: There are no miracle cures, but understanding the behavioral chain of self-defeating behavior, and breaking one link, can disrupt the pattern and promote awareness of options.

Eight stories, each with a lesson that lies at the core of weight control success: put weights in perspective, avoid and plan for risk, focus on self-care, fear not hunger, examine the attachment to weight, change the lifestyle, sweat the small stuff, and break the links. When you put them into action, each lesson becomes a brick that helps build a strong and lasting wall of success. ●



about lee...

Lee Kern, MSW, LCSW, is the clinical director for Structure House, a residential weight loss facility in Durham, N.C. Starting in 1982, Kern has been treating overweight adults and leads the bariatric surgery program at Structure House. Designed for patients preparing for, or following weight loss surgery, the program offers surgery-focused medical assessments and personalized eating and relapse prevention plans. Kern also serves as an adjunct instructor for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Social Work. For information, visit www.structurehouse.com or call 800.553.0052. Structure House is a member of CRC Health Group.