

9 Secrets of Successful Weight Maintenance

By Barbara Brody

You lost the weight -- congratulations! Now it's time to shift your strategy to make it last.

Maintaining weight loss takes a different approach than losing the weight. You can do it, and you can make it easier by following advice from people who have been there and kept the pounds off for years, and even decades. Surprise: It's not all about food anymore.

1. They do it for themselves first.

"Your desire to maintain must be driven by something that's deeper and consistent with your own internal values," says Scott Kahan, MD, director of the National Center for Weight and Wellness. Take some time to think about what's really important to you and how your weight ties into it. For example, you want to be there to see your grandkids grow up, or to take that biking vacation you've always wanted to do.

2. They prize exercise.

You could lose weight based on your diet alone. But to maintain weight loss, physical activity is an absolute must, says James O. Hill, PhD, co-founder of the National Weight Control Registry, a national database of more than 10,000 people who have lost an average of 66 pounds and kept it off an average of 5.5 years. Most people in the registry move for about an hour a day, and walking is their preferred activity. If walking for 60 minutes straight sounds daunting, it's fine to break it up, or do something else you enjoy, Kahan says.

3. They get their baggage in check.

Many people turn to food when they're stressed. If that's you, learning new ways to handle your emotions is a must. Experiment to find things that work for you. Some ideas: Get into your garden, go for a walk, torch stress (and calories) with a serious workout, do yoga to chill out, or connect with a friend. Want more ideas? Consider booking a few sessions with a counselor who has experience working with people to overcome their emotional eating.

4. They don't go it alone.

If you're a lone wolf, it's time to join a pack. "Everybody needs some support, whether it's emotional or logistical, so you stay accountable," Hill says. Try teaming up with family, friends, or co-workers, or sign up for a weight loss support group even if you're already at your goal weight, Kahan says. If you slimmed down with help from a dietitian or other expert, keep checking in with that person every now and then.

5. They limit their screen time.

Whether it's your tablet, phone, computer, or TV, screen time tends to be idle time. And let's face it: It's so easy to overeat while you're parked in front of a screen. So give yourself a curfew: You're only going to watch or surf for a certain amount of time a day.

Consider this: The average American watches 28 hours of TV per week, but 62% of people in the National Weight Control Registry, who have all lost 30 pounds or more and kept it off for at least a year, watch 10 or fewer hours per week.

6. They step on the scale often.

Most people in the National Weight Control Registry weigh themselves regularly. In fact, research shows getting on the scales *daily* is a very effective strategy for those trying to maintain weight loss. "It's not just weighing yourself that's important; it's having a plan for what to do if your weight exceeds the level you want it to be," Hill says.

In other words, you need to know how to take action promptly if you see those numbers starting to climb, whether that means trimming back on portion sizes or skipping dessert more often.

7. They eat breakfast.

Nearly 80% of people in the National Weight Control Registry eat breakfast. Breakfast isn't a magic meal. Weight loss depends on what you're eating and your overall calorie balance throughout the day. One theory is that eating breakfast sets the tone for the rest of your day. So start out with something that gives you nutrients, not empty calories. For instance, you could have oatmeal topped with fruit and nuts, or low-fat yogurt with berries and granola, or an omelet loaded with veggies and some whole wheat toast on the side.

8. They favor fiber.

Make your diet rich in fiber. You get it from plant foods like vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans, nuts, and legumes. Fiber helps you feel full, so you're less likely to overeat later on. And most Americans don't get enough of it. People who eat plenty of fiber -- and who also get regular physical activity, eat fewer calories, and track their progress (such as by weighing themselves regularly or wearing a pedometer) -- are more likely to succeed at long-term weight maintenance.

9. They keep getting back on the wagon.

Vacations, holidays, and stressful life situations happen, and no one eats according to plan all the time. That's OK. The trick is to get back on course as soon as possible. Make it a learning experience, not a failure. Remember that you can move on from setbacks, and maintenance is a marathon, not a sprint.

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