

Setting Realistic Weight Loss Goals

Turns out, it's not the occasional piece of Death by Chocolate Cake that does in our weight loss efforts. It's the universal wish to lose a lot of weight ASAP and the expectation that we can simply diet it away easily.

Weight control experts call it the false-hope syndrome -- when dieters have unrealistic expectations about exactly how long it will take to shed excess pounds.

Unfortunately, research shows that unrealistic expectations boost the risk of dropping out of a weight loss program. And though at least one study has found that dieters may temporarily eat less if their expectations are too high, that undereating may be replaced by overeating at the very next temptation.

Overall, experts concur, unrealistic weight loss objectives are not productive, and can trigger failure. The best way to go: smaller, realistic goals, says Janet Polivy, PhD, a psychologist at the University of Toronto at Mississauga, Canada.

The question is: How do you set realistic weight loss goals?

5 Ways to Set Sensible Weight Loss Goals

When WebMD asked the experts for their tips on setting realistic weight loss goals, their recommendations came down to a few simple strategies. But before you put these to use, remember to talk your weight loss plans over with your doctor.

- *Resolve to lose slowly*

"Medically, most clinicians would say goals of losing five to 10 percent [of your start weight] are achievable," says Jennifer A. Linde, PhD, assistant professor of epidemiology at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

So if you weigh 200 pounds, a reachable target would be to lose 10 to 20 pounds.

- *Do the math.*

"A realistic goal is losing 1 to 2 pounds a week to stay healthy," says Linde.

That means being realistic about your time frame. If you need to lose 25 pounds, figure you are embarking on at least a three-month program. Fifty pounds? Assume a time frame of at least six months. Aim to burn 500 to 1000 calories a day either by eating less, exercising more, or both.

- *Set short term goals.*

Reach for minimilestones. Instead of focusing on just losing 25 pounds, go for -- and celebrate -- that first 5-pound loss.

- *Track your progress.*

Record your successes in a way that works for you. Take advantage of online programs, use a notebook, or keep a journal. Whatever keeps you on track.

- *Think about long-term goals.*

"It's OK to think big, Linde says, "but it may mean starting small and working towards a big goal."

So if your long-term goal is losing 50 pounds in a year, for example, maybe your short-term goal is getting through the day without eating too much.

There's an old saying: Lose it slowly, keep it off. This adage makes sense for at least one reason: Losing weight slowly means you've had time to adopt new behaviors, like eating less and exercising more.

And when you focus on the process of changing your habits --- not just on losing weight -- those new and healthier habits will be a big boost in helping you attain your weight loss goals.

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