

# A WEIGHT LOSS STATE OF MIND

**By Lee Kern, PhD,**

*Men are not prisoners of fate, but only prisoners of their own minds. -F.D. Roosevelt*

*Change your thoughts and you change your world. -Norman Vincent Peale*

The above quotes illustrate the critical role that perspective has in all that we undertake. Weight loss is no different. The way you look at it as you go through the process can either challenge you and keep you in touch with your accomplishments, or lead to disappointment and feeling like giving up. This article will identify several ways in which your attitude can promote success.

## **Two Weight Controllers**

Ken and Leslie are weight control success stories. Neither is at goal weight, but they are on the right path and pleased with their success so far. Leslie has lost 41 pounds and is now 165. She plans meals out 7 days ahead, and sticks to a structure of 3 meals and one evening snack. Ken has lost 90 pounds to a weight of 290. He is driven by the desire to be fit and healthy and expand the activities he can do, such as traveling and taking hikes. The success of Ken and Leslie is in part attributable to constructive perspectives they have employed.

## **Focus on Food and Behavior**

One of the great paradoxes of successful weight control is that it is more likely to be realized when the focus is not weight itself, but rather the behaviors that help get the weight off. Ken sets a goal of working with a personal trainer 3 times a week and going to the gym five times a week. Leslie's goal is to write down everything she eats, and stay under 1700 calories a day. They both have the attitude that they are eating for their nutrition, satisfying physical hunger and not eating in order to escape or soothe feelings. To accomplish this, Ken keeps a hunger scale and rates his hunger from 1 to 10. Leslie practices mindful eating by slowing down, always eating at a table, and eating without distractions such as the TV.

## **Make Health a Target**

Weighing and charting weights can provide accountability and an overall picture of progress, but at some point in the journey the scale can be frustrating. The rate of losing will slow, and there can be plateaus and unexplainable spikes in weight. For many weight losers, becoming healthier is an underlying motivation for engaging in the process, and signs of health improvements can counter these frustrations. Ken said: "I am not driven by pounds or weight, but by feeling healthy." Leslie has eliminated medications for high blood pressure and lowered her diabetes medications. With health as a target, diet choices will improve: less fat and sodium, more fruit and vegetables. Healthy fats such as olive oil will

creep into the diet, and sweets and other simple carbohydrates will be reduced. A healthy, “volumetric” diet will be filling but low in calories.

### **Celebrate Improved Functioning**

Once I noticed that all the participants in a support group I was leading had their shoe laces tied over to the side of the shoe. Weight was interfering with the ability to bend down to tie their shoes, so instead they had to lift each leg up and prop it on the opposite knee. Weight loss, especially when combined with exercise, begins to restore a variety of normal functions that then float the boat of self-esteem. Ken was proud of no longer needing the seat belt extension on plane flights, and Leslie was able to wear normal size clothing. Ken’s personal training sessions led to dramatic improvements in stamina and strength, renewing his confidence to do international travel. He planned a trip to the Great Wall of China. It’s important to celebrate the many benefits of all the hard work: improved body measurements, better sex life, boosts to self-esteem and mood, expanded activities like gardening or dancing. One study called these incremental improvements “the continuum of positive living.” I encourage people to make a list of all the small but important signs of progress, which will bolster you during plateaus or temporary gains.

### **Get Real**

Scott Peck, in his book *The Road Less Traveled*, identifies one function of the healthy personality as a “dedication to reality.” Denial will always pose a threat to success, which is why a commitment to honesty through self-monitoring is essential. Record what you eat, count the calories, log minutes or steps of exercise, graph your weights; all these serve as denial busters. It is also important not to exaggerate the benefits of weight loss. Expecting weight loss to launch your career or turn an introvert into a social butterfly is likely to set up disappointment and a possible decision to give up. Enjoy the incremental benefits mentioned above, but accept that some changes in life require a complex set of skills that go beyond losing weight. It is also important to be realistic about your goals. Studies suggest that weight loss goals are notoriously unrealistic. They are often called “dream weights.” To avoid this trap, pace yourself and think of goals more broadly. Ken wanted to feel healthy and not tired when traveling. Leslie wanted to find self-soothing techniques like visualization to help her stop bingeing when stressed. Diversity of goals takes the pressure off hoping that a magic number of pounds will fix all life’s problems.

### **In The End**

Putting an old photograph or painting in a new frame can enhance the look of the art and bring out its essence. The psychological principal of “re-framing” is very similar. By changing the way we look at something we activate our best performance. You can maximize weight control outcomes by cultivating a weight loss state of mind: focus on food and behavior, make health a target, celebrate improved functioning, and get real.