

# Challenge for the New Year

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Every New Year, I vow not to write another weight loss article. Yet, when I pick up the newspaper or listen to random conversations at this time of the year, they all involve the topic of weight loss. Since I don't believe in the effectiveness of "dieting", this whole situation makes it very challenging for me not to speak up. So instead of fighting it, I'll give in to my instincts and hope that you'll be enlightened along the way.

If you have read any of my previous articles, you would know by now that weight loss is the direct result of eating less than what your body needs. This process creates an energy deficit. When your body does not receive enough energy (in the form of food calories), it begins to draw from what it has stored (in the body—from both body fat and muscles). The outcome is weight loss. Therefore, weight loss occurs when you eat less. Unfortunately the opposite is also true. The more you eat, the more weight you will gain. This sounds logical and reasonable, right? However, it can be miserable when you have to eat by this equation with hopes of trying to tip the scale in your favor. What is worse, everyone has a different equilibrium. What may be sufficient calories for one person may be excessive for another.

Don't you wish that there was a short cut? In reality, most of us would like to have our cake and eat it too. In fact, we really don't want to give up our bad habits. As I said to my hair dresser the other day, "Rick, don't tell me what I am doing wrong with my hair. Just fix it." Most of the time, we know what we are doing wrong. No matter how much we wish or want, when it comes to losing weight, there is no short cut or quick fix.

I know, I know. Your friend just told you she lost twenty pounds on a new diet. Before you jump on that diet wagon, be aware: if those twenty pounds of weight loss occurred during the course of a year (or more), then your friend will most likely keep that weight off. However, if that loss of twenty pounds occurred within a couple of months or less, don't be surprised to see the weight come back on with a vengeance. The difference is simple. The slow weight loss typically means that your friend made smaller changes—including changes to her lifestyle. Because these changes were slight, she's more apt to stick to them for the long term. On the other hand, if she lost the weight in a short period, she most likely went on a drastic diet that will be impossible to stay on. She eliminated many things she may not be able to live without in the long haul. Most diets out there will result in weight loss because a majority of (regular) foods are no longer "allowed." However, when you are limited to eating one or two food groups, you may experience food fatigue which can lead to cheating on the diet (and weight gain). One thing you can count on, when you take food away, weight loss will happen. Dieting for weight loss does work; however, it does not promote permanent weight loss. That is why I do not believe in dieting. You end up trying to lose the same twenty pounds over and over. With each loss, there is more gained as your baseline weight creeps higher

and higher. Permanent weight loss occurs with lifestyle changes that you can maintain for the rest of your life.

So what are you to do? Change your outlook. Realize that your body weight does not control your happiness. Focus instead on your health and forget about losing weight. Eat food for its nutritive value. A majority of lower calorie foods contain more nutrients than their higher caloric counterparts. Take a look at vegetables. A ½ cup serving of a typical green vegetable provides 25 calories and is full of vitamins A, C, B and a host of phytochemicals (antioxidants). Sadly, the same is not true of cheesecake or a Big Mac. Once you remove the stress and pressure of needing to lose weight, it will give way to eating for the health and joy of it. Your outlook on your weight will improve and slowly, you will notice your body weight decrease.

What does eating healthy mean? This could take a whole semester to explain, however, there are tools like [mypyramid.gov](http://mypyramid.gov) that can be helpful. You can use this web site to formulate an appropriate diet to consume. You should focus on eating a diet that emphasizes fruit, vegetables, whole grain and lean meats and non-fat/low-fat dairy products. Combine this with regular exercise (a minimum of 30 minutes a day most days of the week) and you will notice positive changes to your body and health.

In my basic nutrition class, a majority of my students experience weight loss (in one semester). Why? They have become more aware of what they put in their body. They stop eating out of boredom, habit, stress, depression, etc. and start eating because they are hungry and/or because their body needs it. Many even begin exercising. They learn the science behind what happens to food that is consumed and what happens to their health when their bodies receive too much (or too little) food. In addition, they are motivated and have social support from their classmates.

What about lifestyle changes? Again, in my basic nutrition class, I created “Challenge of the Week” to help them become more aware of their eating and behavior that may actually interfere with weight loss. Each week I present a new challenge for them to implement. They are to maintain these challenges for the rest of the semester (and hopefully the rest of their lives) while adding new ones each week. Implementing these challenges will instill new (healthy) lifestyle habits for them. The following is a list of some of my challenges along with the rationale for the challenge.

**1. Don't eat standing up; eat only when seated.**

Hundreds of calories are consumed a day, subconsciously. Many of these calories are the direct result of mindless snacking. How many times have you opened the refrigerator and ate leftovers without a second thought (and many times without a fork)? What about eating over the stove? Or grabbing a handful of chips or cookies as you walk by the kitchen? These are what I call, “invisible calories.” Invisible calories are calories that are consumed without any witnesses. Unfortunately, just because no one observes the secretive eating doesn't mean the foods consumed are calorie-free. This useless consumption typically occurs while standing up. Requiring that the students sit down to eat will create a conscious acknowledgement that he/she is eating.

In addition, the act of sitting will make the student think twice about eating the actual food. (This proves to be a very difficult challenge. My students report they keep catching themselves in the act and they quickly walk away from the situation.) Sitting down also allows the student to slow down and enjoy the foods they are consuming. This also reduces eating for reasons other than hunger. There are many times when people eat because they are stressed or depressed. The act of sitting down is a reminder for them to examine why they are eating.

**2. Designate one place as your place of eating (preferably not in front of the television).**

I guess it should not surprise me to know that many of my students eat in front of the television. In doing so, they are distracted by the television and this may promote higher intake. This challenge is to remind the student to use meal time for meal time. By designating one place for eating, this will also limit snacking. The act of having to go to that designated place to eat may be enough to stop a person from useless eating.

**3. Give up one useless food a day (e.g., candy bar, soft drink, cookie, donut, etc.)**

Many of these empty calorie foods provide very little nutrients for the number of calories they provide. Although this challenge does not require that the students give up the (useless) food altogether, it is simply advising students to acknowledge these foods and give one up per day. These food can provide anywhere from 300-800 calories each. By simply eliminating these calories (per day), it can add to the calorie deficit needed to promote weight loss.

**4. Give up the remote**

I find it comical that when the remote is lost in my (one television) household, my children would prefer not to watch anything at all. They prefer to read or go outside than to walk that five or fewer steps to manually change the channel. Without the remote, the concept of channel surfing is no more. The thought of watching one whole show with its commercials is worse than hearing finger nails across the chalk board. Television watching is a common past time for many families. The hours spent watching television could be better spent doing something more physically active. If nothing else, the act of having to get up and down to change the channel or volume is physical activity in it and of itself.

**5. Don't eat and drive**

I have been behind cars where the driver is multi-tasking to the point that it is a driving hazard. I personally have a stick-shift and this makes it almost impossible to do anything else but drive. Aside from the driving danger, what I observed is that people in cars are eating without any thought as to what they are eating, how much they are eating, and what the food is actually doing to their body. The fast food industries have captured this market and promote it with drive-throughs and portable foods. Initially, food may seem to be satisfying but after completing the meal (while driving), there was no acknowledgment of how much food was actually eaten. This causes more consumption of calories than needed.

#### **6. Try a new food (once a week)**

We all get stuck in a rut. We may eat the same things every day with some minor changes. I challenge the students to take more interest in the foods they eat by encouraging them to try something new. This may be a new vegetarian fare or a new vegetable that they saw in the store. They may find that eating a new food is actually fun and they will be more interested in looking for ways to prepare (home-cook) the food. This will also promote preparing their own food (instead of relying on processed, convenient foods).

#### **7. Add an extra vegetable a day/Add an extra fruit a day**

It is not surprising that the intake of fruits and vegetable is low for majority of Americans. There are many reasons for this. Typically it is because people do not have the time or do not know how to prepare or in some cases even how to eat it (e.g., star fruit, papaya, etc.). These challenges force the students to think outside of their typical intake and look for creative ways to add more fruit or vegetables to their daily intake. This also requires that they set aside time to plan and think a little more about the foods they eat.

The above suggestions are just a sampling of the Challenges that I use for my class. It has been a very successful method to teach students how to take ownership of their health and to be more aware of their own nutrition. Dieting is not advised because it does not lead to life-long health or permanent weight loss. Eating food for the health of it is a more realistic and effective way to promote a healthy weight. So for this New Year's resolution, take the challenge, stop the dieting madness and start focusing on your health.