

Excerpt from Overweight: What Kids Say, pp. 292-298.

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How then do kids lose weight?

If the childhood obesity epidemic is indeed occurring today because of a perfect storm of widely available, highly pleasurable, comforting foods combined with stressed, depressed kids, who are addictively hooked on the comfort and displacement activity of eating, how then do these kids become unhooked and lose weight?

Withdrawal period

As discussed earlier in this chapter, it appears that successful kids go through a period of withdrawal - intense cravings, feeling antsy, feeling stressed, even depressed – when they cut down or stop the foods they are hooked on. Plain willpower is rarely enough to get them through withdrawal. Kids need lots and lots of support and distracting fun activities to get through it. Fortunately, kids say in their posts that the discomfort of withdrawal usually gets a lot better within a week or two (see Success Stories, Chapter 14).

It may be that morbidly (severely) obese kids can make it through withdrawal only by gastric bypass surgery or by live-in weight loss centers, such as weight loss camps or boarding schools, where access to food is strictly controlled. Camps and live-in weight loss centers, although expensive, seem a far better solution for morbidly obese kids than gastric bypass, which has lifelong side effects, as well as a small risk of death. However, even if kids can make it through withdrawal cravings, once they leave a camp or a center, they must then cope with life without seeking comfort or stress relief from food. They may therefore still experience unbearable cravings after going through the withdrawal period, particularly if their food dependence is in part displacement activity (stress eating). At the live-in Insula weight loss center for youth in Berchtesgaden, Germany, I talked with a teen who was about to return home after losing nearly 80 lb. He confided that he greatly feared being unable to handle the temptations of fast food and junk food, once he returned to the uncontrolled environment of his home and school.

Strategy

Below are strategies and techniques, which successful kids posted that they used to make it through the discomfort of withdrawal and become unhooked from their problem foods:

1) They develop motivation

The kids focus on why they want to lose weight (see Chapter 7). So they won't be teased? So

they can attract the opposite sex? So they won't get diseases? So they can move faster in sports? So they can wear clothing in style? They realize that staying obese will definitely damage their body as they become an adult, thus to have an adult life without health problems they absolutely must lose weight. They post their reasons on the boards. Which is more important: the reasons that they want to lose weight... or being entertained and comforted by food? Also, they post their weight goals and other goals (make the baseball team, etc.).

"When you think of quitting, remember why you started" -- Nicole, Age 12

They acknowledge that overeating is an addiction, similar to alcoholism and smoking, and that they must break their addiction. Comparable to Alcoholics Anonymous, they are not to blame for being overweight or obese, but they do take responsibility for it.

2) They make a plan

"If you fail to plan, then you plan to fail." -- Gina, Age 16

They post their plan:

- a) What foods will they cut down or cut out? Junk food, fast food? Other foods? Portion sizes, second helpings? For example, they could cut everything they usually eat in half and save half for later.*
- b) What supportive, distracting things will they do when they go through withdrawal, such as take a walk with their dog or a friend, ride their bike, work on a hobby, shoot basketball, go dancing, take a course, decorate their room, or call a friend?*
- c) How else will they deal with cravings? Having sweet apples, frozen grapes, or baby carrots in the fridge or flavored ice water helps. A little bit of pleasure in their food can also help manage cravings (as noted on pp. 252). Squeezing their hands really tight together helps with cravings or antsy feelings.*
- d) Their start date.*
- e) Getting through withdrawal is looked at like a job - a job that they get paid for later.*
- f) Once they get through withdrawal, how will they cope with life without turning to food? They consider stress management, meditation, relaxation techniques, and counseling.*

From anne, Age 16 - 8/22/03

- i read the blubberbuster advice for cravings and it said to **hold your hands together**. i was like yeah right! that is not going to work for me! but last night i watched my boyfriend eat a reeses sunday and i didn't have a single bite. as simple as it sounds- **it works**, hey- if you don't have your hands free then you won't grab and eat stuff.

3) They look at food as something their body needs to live on, rather than something just for pleasure

Their plan includes eating only at mealtimes, only one helping, with one or two small snacks in between. No eating after supper. No problem foods. They shoot for eating foods that are palatable (taste good), but are not hyper-pleasurable and thus not addictable.

4) They arrange support persons and accountability

Before starting, the child or teen arranges support from a health professional - a doctor, school counselor or nurse - and from friends and family. The support persons will provide accountability as well as support. He/she tells these people about the plan to lose weight, and that he/she needs their support in order to make it through withdrawal. He/she informs them of the start date. The support persons agree to be available by phone or email. This requirement for support persons may be a problem, given the disconnect between many overweight kids and their caregivers (parents, doctors) as revealed in Chapters 5 and 6. The post below relates what successful kids do:

From PRESHUS - 01/28/06

.. I was at my highest weight of 190 pounds... I lost 15 pounds.. FIND supportERS TO HELP ENCOURAGE NOT DISCOURAGE YOU...

5) They become aware of what they feel when they seek a food

They learn to recognize true hunger (grumbling, empty stomach) versus emotional hunger (seeking comfort from food when upset, nervous, or bored). They acknowledge that they're hooked-on, even addicted to, certain foods that they seek out when unhappy or bored. They identify situations that push them to crave pleasurable foods, such as a trying day at school, a party where they feel ill-at-ease, family fighting, difficult homework, or a test at school.

"Have control over your body dont let your body have control over you" -- Melissa, Age 16

6) They eliminate, hide, and stay away from 'hookable' foods

Most of us cannot resist the temptation of having comforting, stress-relieving foods in front of us. So... these kids try to not put these foods where they can see them. They empty the house of junk food.

From Alli, Age 15 - Out of sight, out of mind - don't put yourself in front of temptation or temptation in front of you.

They stock the house with fruits and veggies for snacks. They stay away from fast food restaurants. They go shopping with their parents and buy low-fat, sugar-free foods for comfort and healthy foods like fruits for snacks. They have fun with it... smoothies anyone?

The kids get out of the house. But they don't put themselves in front of a bakery or a Burger King or Wendy's. They go for a walk with the family dog or a friend. They go for a bike ride, or rollerblade, or go on a hike, or visit a museum, or the library, or volunteer at the local animal shelter by caring for lonely pets.

7) They deal with the irresistible urges to eat

When the kids can't stop thinking about food, they vividly imagine how awful they would feel if they were fatter - more teasing, more embarrassment, not fitting into clothes, not getting dates. And they imagine how fantastic they would feel if they were thinner – able to move more easily, wearing cool clothes, feeling proud, a prom date. They realize that the food would taste great and make them feel better for only a few minutes, and then they would feel horrible.

From Carlie, Age 14 - Taste is temporary, weight is forever..

From Court, Age 16 - Before you decide to eat something...ask yourself, "How will I feel about this (cake, chips, etc.) in 6 months?"

From Jess, Age 12 - Would you rather be happy for 10 minutes while eating & be miserable after for hours??

From Hannah, Age 12- Imagine what you're about to eat superglued to your butt, lol.

They realize that the urges for great tasting foods are like a bad back. Similar to chronic back pain, the urges will always be there, even though they will get better. The kids learn to go about their lives ignoring the urges, even though they will never totally go away. The more they can ignore the urges, the less the urges grate on them. They read a book, work on a hobby, or shoot hoops to distract from the urges. Just relaxing also helps.

8) They counter –condition their addiction to problem foods

They associate vile things with foods they're hooked on, such as the following post suggests:

Reply from Christine, Age 17, Wt: 190 - 11/02/09

... Eat a Big Mac while staring at a picture of a dirty toilet or having fried chicken while looking at cockroaches. I ended up having to do something similar to break my addiction. (And I'm down 30 pounds from my highest weight!)

They regard highly pleasurable food like a drug, which they must get off of.

From elle, Age 14, female - 10/25/08 - Food was like a drug for me.

"You will feel worse before you feel better, when you are starting to change."

9) They practice portion control

They practice eating half of the food that is delivered at restaurants and saving half for later, or simply discarding it. They learn to grab only a handful of chips and put the bag away.

From Rappy, Age 13 - 08/06/02

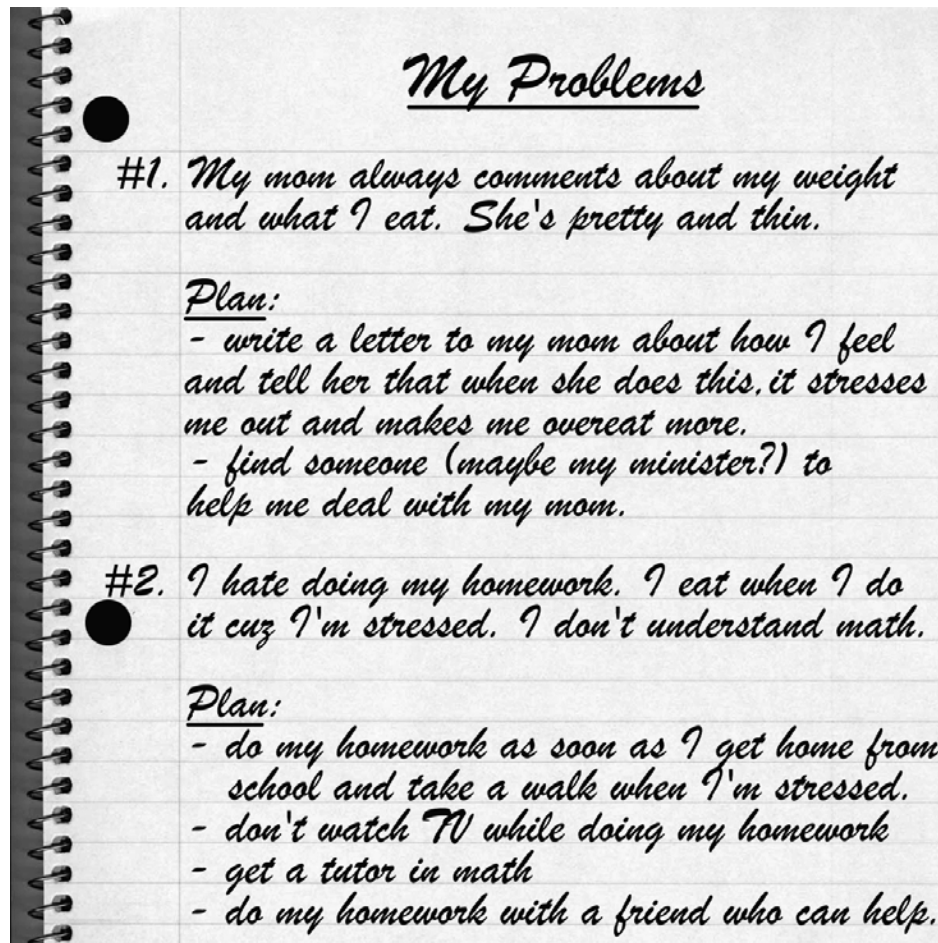
I have 1.5 lbs to go before I reach my goal for now! I may change it later, but this is how I did it. .. **cut in half what you would normally eat and save one half for later.**

10) They exercise regularly

They engage in regular physical activity, which is any activity they enjoy, which gets them moving, such as walking, riding bikes, non-competitive sports. Exercise improves mood and self-esteem and is a form of displacement activity, which relieves stress. Exercise engenders the attitude "I am a healthy person."

11) They cope with life without using food

Even before symptoms of withdrawal fully ease, the real work begins. The kids learn to cope with life - sadness, stress, loneliness, and boredom - by substituting other things for the numbing pleasure and comfort of food. Many overweight and obese kids have never learned to cope with life's pains, without seeking comfort and stress relief from food, or they have long ago lost those coping skills. Successful kids find soothing and stress relieving activities, such as non-competitive sports, pets, hobbies, books, musical instruments, volunteer work, counseling, calling a friend - anything they enjoy besides food. Relaxation, meditation, and deep breathing exercises, like yoga, help relieve stress. They look at life as a 'glorious adventure' and they remember that 'life is too important to be taken seriously.' They write down their emotions, like "I feel nervous." They write down their problems, 1,2,3, with a plan for each problem, as shown on the following page.



They make a sign like the one below and put it on their wall.

JUST DO IT!!!

And then they do it!

12) They become a helper

Once they have achieved some success at losing weight, they become a helper to those just starting out. Becoming a helper is a win-win, as helping someone else reinforces the changes the helper has made in themselves. Explaining what works to someone else, gives the helper a deep understanding of the process, and helping improves their own self-worth.

Abstaining from foods with which kids have the most problem - gradual method that kids use to lose weight (removing the culprit one by one)

Stopping 'cold turkey' all hooked-on foods at once is quite hard. The resulting withdrawal discomfort may be too much to bear. A 'divide and conquer' approach is more achievable.

Here's a method that some kids have used for getting unhooked from problem foods one at a time, make it through withdrawal for each one, and thereby lose weight:

- 1) Kids pick one food that they have a problem with, like candy, soda, or french fries.*
- 2) They stop eating that one food completely. They stay away from it, if possible.*
- 3) They go through withdrawal for that one food. They expect to feel intense cravings, antsy, maybe even stressed or depressed.*
- 4) They realize that the withdrawal discomfort will mostly go away within a week or two.*
- 5) They then repeat steps 1-4 for each food they are hooked on and go through withdrawal for each food in turn.*
- 6) Large portion sizing is also something they stop, but again, they must go through the withdrawal feelings for a couple of weeks for each major portion change they make.*
- 7) They are careful not to substitute a new high pleasure food for the foods from which they become unhooked. The idea is to substitute foods which are not highly pleasurable and thus not addicting.*
- 8) Removing high pleasure additives from food is also a way kids get unhooked, such as breads without added sugar, or low fat milk instead of chocolate milk. Mixing chocolate and low fat milk or regular and low fat milk together is a way to gradually change.*