How to Maintain Your Weight Long-Term After Using a Meal-Replacement Program

By Linda Spangle, RN, MA

You can do it!

Helen was back! Her discouragement was obvious as she described her struggles over the past year.

“I don’t know what went wrong!” she said. “I worked so hard to lose weight, and I was thrilled when I finally hit my goal.

But now, look at me! I’ve gained it all back plus a bunch more. I do great when I’m dieting, but I guess I’ve never learned how to maintain.”

Maybe she’s right. When she signed up for her meal-replacement program, she was grateful that she didn’t have to plan meals or cook. Perhaps this is why she didn’t learn how to follow a healthy eating plan on her own.

But as we talked, it became clear that it wasn’t lack of knowledge that caused her to re-gain weight. Helen knew it all—from reciting the calorie content of almost any food, to monitoring her target heart rate and choosing the ideal number of reps on her weight machine.

The problem wasn’t that Helen didn’t know how to maintain. It was that she also knew exactly how to NOT maintain.

As we continued talking, Helen realized that she’d let go of the guidelines that were critical to her long-term success.

How to NOT maintain

I asked Helen to think about where she’d made mistakes over the past months. Then together, we made a list of all the activities and behaviors that she knows DON’T keep her weight off.

Here’s what she came up with:

* Watch a lot of TV, especially in the evenings. Mindlessly eat snack foods the entire time.

* Go out with my eating and drinking friends. I get tired of feeling left out, so I join in. After a couple glasses of wine, I don’t care if I eat right any more.
* Eat the same things as everybody else. I recently watched as my friend ordered a large hamburger and fries, and on the spot, I decided to have one as well. Of course, I added bacon, cheddar and mayo to my burger.

* Take care of everybody else instead of myself. Because my days are so busy, I tend to skip all my self-care and nurturing activities. Then my confidence goes down because I don’t feel good about myself, and that makes me start looking for something to eat.

* Going back to old ways of coping. When I get stressed or feel down, I drink more alcohol, skip my exercise program, and tell myself I’ll get back on track tomorrow. Of course, I never do.

As she reviewed her list, Helen realized that she’d done the exact opposite of all the things that would help manage her weight. Then I asked Helen to take each item and flip it the other way. In other words, I told her to find alternatives for everything that didn’t work.

For example, instead of watching TV all evening, she could go back to filling her time with other activities she enjoyed. These included going to a weekly scrap booking group, working on home decorating projects and reading historical novels, her favorite type of books.

With each of the other things on her list, Helen planned how she could flip the activity into something that was much healthier for her weight management. Suddenly she got it! Helen realized that she really DID know how to maintain.

**What it takes**

It’s easy to blame a lack of knowledge for your struggles with maintaining your weight. And you may be right. Maybe you actually do need to learn more about good nutrition, meal planning and consistent exercise.

But my guess is that you know a lot about those things. And just like Helen, you also know what contributes to not keeping the weight off…

- Let my exercise program go. Stop taking walks
- Watch a lot of TV, especially in the evenings
- Drink more alcohol, use it to relax
- Spend time with my eating and drinking friends
- Skip all my self-care or nurturing activities
- Never say NO to a party or a fun gathering
- Convince myself I don’t care about my weight
- Stop reading weight loss or personal growth books
- Talk to my mother every day (she always makes me want to eat)
Now take this knowledge about what gets you in trouble and flip it the other way. In other words, do the exact opposite of everything that doesn’t work. Here’s how your list looks now:

- Stick with my exercise program including taking walks every day
- Minimize watching TV, especially in the evenings
- Limit my alcohol intake, look for other ways to relax
- Build friendships with people who strive to be healthy
- Regularly do self-care or nurturing activities
- Learn to say NO to a party or gathering that will harm my goals
- Remind myself that I always care about my weight
- Include weight loss or personal growth books in my reading list
- Limit the times when I talk to my mother, learn to manage stress

If you consistently stick with this new list, you’ll immediately have a great maintenance plan.

**Obesity is a “condition”**

If you’re like most dieters, you can’t wait for your program to be done. You keep hoping that, one of these days, you’ll reach your goal weight and not have to think about it anymore.

Unfortunately, this probably won’t ever happen. For most people, there is no such thing as permanent weight loss.

In reality, obesity is a condition just like diabetes. When people become diabetic, they first have to get their condition under control, then live every single day in a way that keeps it managed.

A diabetic can’t leave town and proclaim, “Hooray! I’m on vacation. I don’t want to think about anything, so I’ll just leave my insulin at home!”

Most diabetics have to monitor their condition regularly, including during vacations. Unless it’s carefully managed, diabetes can quickly get out of hand, increasing the risk of developing major health problems.

**Risk of gaining weight back**

Just like diabetes, you can’t ignore the condition of obesity. Once you have it, you’re stuck. You’re never free of this condition. It can’t be cured and there’s no being done with it.

Even once you’ve reached your weight-loss goal, you’ll always remain vulnerable to gaining the weight back. To successfully maintain your new weight, you have to pay attention to your condition every day—in spite of vacations, job changes and other life challenges.
Accept the condition

To really achieve long-term success, you have to start by accepting that you have a condition. You may have to work through some anger or frustration to reach this point.

It’s not easy to give up the myth of being “done” with managing your weight. But until you decide to accept this and live in a way that shows it, you risk gaining your weight back time and time again.

Think about what it will take to manage your condition in future years. Since you can’t leave your condition at home during social events or vacations, plan how you’ll take care of it while you’re out.

As you integrate this concept into your daily life, you’ll discover that it’s one of the secrets to long-term success.

Accept the solution

Let’s suppose that even though you’re not happy about it, you’ve decided to accept that obesity is a condition and that you’re stuck with it long-term.

Now it’s time to add one more piece—you have to be willing to accept the solution. That means not only living in a way that matches your goals, but also being willing to do this for the rest of your life.

For some people, this part is even harder than accepting the condition. It seems so unfair. Why can some people eat all they want and never gain an ounce?

We may never know the answer to that question. What counts is that you choose to manage your weight in spite of how others around you are living.

Define how you’ll live

If you don’t commit to managing your condition for life, your weight-loss efforts will eventually fail.

To achieve long-term success, you simply have to reach a point of being willing to do the work that’s involved. Look at it this way:

A decision about what to weigh is a decision about how to live.

Once you make a commitment to staying at your goal weight, you have to adopt the way of life that goes with it.

To manage your weight long-term, you’ll always have to apply certain guidelines and boundaries to your food intake. That means you no longer have the option of supersizing your meals or eating everything you want.
It also means that you’ll need to develop a realistic exercise program that works for all of the seasons. And when holidays roll around, you’ll have to come up with a clear strategy to help you get through the mounds of mashed potatoes, candy and pumpkin pie.

**What’s your plan?**

Even with making a clear decision about “how to live,” you’ll probably still have days or even weeks when you’ll let up on your efforts. But unless you’re willing to accept the solution over the long run, you probably won’t be successful.

During times when you begin sliding backwards, remind yourself that you have a *condition* that requires your attention. Then get back to work on managing it in a healthy way.

This special report provides support for the book *Shaker Jar Diet* by Linda Spangle.