

Get off those scales!

EXPERTS SAY WE ARE GENETICALLY PROGRAMMED TO BE A CERTAIN WEIGHT. SO, MAKE YOUR LIFE DIET-FREE AND ENJOY IT!

BY ARIANA FABRIS

diets are nutritionally inadequate, expensive, boring and difficult to sustain long term. "Too many people have unrealistic expectations when they diet," says Melbourne dietitian Melanie McGrice. "Do they really expect to live the rest of their lives on rice and steamed vegetables?"

But there may be another reason why we can't shift those stubborn kilos. Some experts believe the answer lies in our own bodies' biology. They've even given it a name: set point theory.

WHAT IS SET POINT THEORY?

The set point theory of weight is well established amongst health professionals, and put simply, states that all of us have a particular weight range that our bodies have been genetically programmed to keep within. In other words, if your "set point" lies somewhere between sixty and sixty-five kilos, your body will actually fight to maintain that weight – no matter how often you diet, how much exercise you do, or how long you starve yourself on cottage cheese and celery sticks. Try going below your set point, and your body immediately swings into action, creating a drive to eat that is almost impossible to ignore. Defying what nature has given you will leave you pretty much destined for a life of miserable (and useless) yo-yo dieting – and perhaps even put yourself at risk of developing a dangerous eating disorder.

Why do our bodies work so vigorously to defend our set point? Josephine

Gibson, community education officer at the EDFV and also a dietitian, explains: "When your body doesn't receive enough energy from a diet, it goes into a "starvation" type mode, which relates back to our ancestors who survived on a hunter-gatherer lifestyle and sometimes went long periods without food. Our metabolism (the body's energy-burning activities) slows down and the body begins to store any energy it receives as a reserve for the future."

So, our bodies are just trying to protect us. They can't distinguish between going on a diet and actual famine – and they certainly don't care about current trends in fashion, or what today's society has deemed to be the ideal body shape.

Just how well established is set point theory, and does it really exist? Melanie McGrice believes it does, but concedes that environment probably also plays a part in determining an individual's weight. "Today, people in Australia on average are much heavier than they were fifty years ago, yet our genes haven't changed," she points out. The National Eating Disorders Information Centre (NEDIC) in Toronto, Canada, has actually put a figure on it, suggesting that our weight is about 81 per cent genetically determined.

If Australians are heavier than they used to be, then it may well be that many of us are actually sitting above our set point. It follows, then, that if we could all learn to eat "normally" again, that is, eat in response to hunger rather than because of boredom, depression or just that we're feeling a little emotional, we'd lose weight.

We all know someone who's been on a diet, and most likely been on one or two ourselves. But of all the people you know who have ever tried to lose weight, how many of them have actually succeeded, and kept it off?

It's been estimated that Australian women spend a staggering \$400 million a year trying to shed kilos, with up to 50 per cent of us being on some sort of diet on any given day. The bad news is that the vast majority of these diets don't work. In fact, according to the Eating Disorders Foundation of Victoria (EDFV), 95 per cent of people who diet regain all the weight they've lost plus more within two years.

So, why doesn't dieting work? A number of reasons have been put forward: "fad"

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Sue Middleton, a teacher from Heidelberg in Victoria describes how, after a seven-year battle with her own body, she decided to adopt a more natural approach to eating. "During those years my weight fluctuated from as low as fifty-five kilos to up around seventy. I felt miserable and depressed, until finally – after having reached the lowest of lows – I'd had enough. I decided to stop depriving myself, and just eat whenever I was hungry. Put simply, I started to really listen to my body."

What happened after that was quite remarkable. At first, Sue gained weight – something she attributes to the effect all that yo-yo dieting had on her metabolism – but after a few months, the kilos started to come off. Eventually, her weight stabilised at sixty-two kilos, her set point. "That was nearly ten years ago," she says, "and I haven't been on a diet since."

Jenny McFadden, co author of *Diet No More* (Nectar Australia) had a similar experience, describing how she dropped three dress sizes by becoming what she describes as a "natural eater", someone who eats "on demand" and therefore has no need or desire to diet, count kilojoules or – at the opposite end of the scale – binge on junk food. The book shows how, through a series of simple and well-explained steps and exercises, people can get in touch with their body's natural feelings of hunger and eventually break free from the dieting merry-go-round.

If you want to work out what your set point is, how do you do it? Well, there's certainly no measurement or test you can take. In fact, the only way to estimate it, as Sue Middleton did, is to eat normally and engage in moderate exercise for about 12 months. This means cutting out all diets, eating from a wide range of foods, not depriving yourself of anything and being moderately active in a way that you will enjoy and keep up. Eventually, your metabolism and weight should return to what is normal for you.

LEARN TO LOVE YOUR BODY

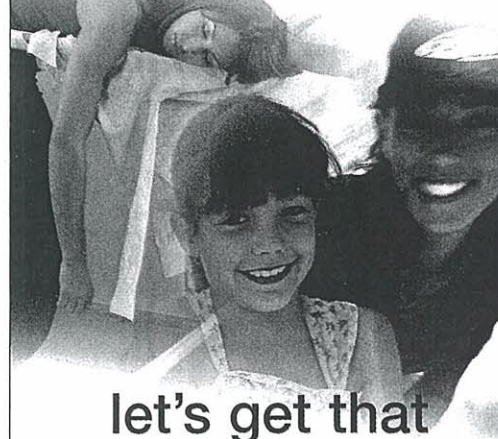
What if you reach your set point weight (after losing, say, ten kilos) and you're still not happy? What if you still want to be a size 10 instead of a size 16? It then comes down to acceptance, and learning to love and respect what nature has prescribed for you. You may not be able to squeeze into that tiny bathing suit, but chances are you'll actually look and feel better at your natural weight. Your skin will be clearer, your hair shinier and you'll have more energy for life than you thought possible. On top of that, all the time and energy you previously spent agonising over that Mars bar you shouldn't have had, can now be channelled into other areas, such as pursuing long-held dreams and desires. You might even decide to take out that gym membership you've been promising yourself!

After all, "we live in a world where there are millions of different body shapes," says Josephine Gibson, "each one different, each one individual and each one "normal". So maybe it's time to just relax, let go, and allow Mother Nature to win the battle of the bulge. Eventually, she will anyway.

RE-DISCOVER YOUR NATURAL WEIGHT

1. Stop weighing foods, counting kilojoules and calculating the fat content of everything you eat.
2. Throw out the bathroom scales.
3. Listen to your body's hunger cues and eat accordingly.
4. At mealtimes, eat until you're satisfied, then stop.
5. Treat yourself to your favourite snack foods without feeling guilty.
6. Realise that it's okay to leave food on your plate; you can always have it tomorrow.
7. Enjoy a wide variety of foods.
8. Exercise moderately 3–4 times a week. Choose an activity you enjoy.
9. Use moderate constraint on your food, without being obsessed.
10. Stop treating food as the enemy. ☐

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