

Features

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Try the 'Couple Approach' to losing weight

By Rebecca Cohen - Chronicle Columnist

If you and your friend or life partner both want to lose weight, consider working together to accomplish your goals.

Losing weight as a couple offers many advantages over working alone, but the journey to success can be filled with many challenges that will test the bond between you. For example, one person usually ends up taking on the role of "food police," monitoring every morsel of food the other eats. And if you use your partner's lapses as an excuse to avoid sticking with your own weight loss plan, neither of you will make much progress losing weight.

The primary benefit of working with a partner to lose weight is that you can provide each other with support and inspiration. If you are living together, decisions about what foods to buy and prepare, and where to dine out, are typically easier when you're both on the same team.

But a common drawback to losing weight as a "couple" is the result of biological differences between men and women. If one dieter is a male and the other a female, comparing numbers on the scale can create frustration for the woman because it is typically easier for men to lose weight and keep it off. Reasons for this difference include: 1) men have a higher concentration of water in their bodies so they tend to shed weight faster, and a woman's weight loss may not show up on the scale as quickly; 2) premenopausal women are more likely to see fluctuations in weight because of the monthly water-weight gain and loss; and 3) many men can eat more than women without gaining, and lose weight by cutting back less, because they are bigger and have a higher calorie budget.

In a 16-month study looking at exercise for weight loss, men and women completed an identical amount of exercise. The men lost an average 11.5 pounds; the women maintained weight. Another study of a group of men and women engaged in the same marathon training program found that men lost twice as many pounds as the women, even though the men increased their calorie intake by 500 calories per day and women increased their intake by only 60 calories. Researchers believe that these things happen because nature seems protective of women's role as child bearer and wants women to maintain adequate body fat for nourishing healthy babies. Hence, women are more energy-efficient. Obesity researchers at New York's Columbia University suggest a pound of weight loss in men equates to a deficit of about 2,500 calories, while women need a 3,500-calorie deficit. No wonder women have a tougher time losing weight than men do.

Losing weight as a couple: Getting started

Whatever weight loss regime you and your partner decide to follow, remember these basic guidelines:

1. Have frequent small meals during the day to increase calorie burning;
2. Include aerobic exercise, weight training and stretching in your daily exercise;
3. Reduce your fat and salt intake, avoid processed foods, increase your intake of fruits and vegetables, eat whole-grain products and reduce the intake of foods made from white flour;
4. Stay active throughout the day, not just during the run at the gym;
5. Make a list of activities not related to food to do together when you feel an eating binge coming on;
6. Keep a food journal of everything you eat, when you eat it and your emotions at the time;
7. Studies indicate that when a man exercises more, he loses weight because his body does not encourage him to eat more. However, when a woman exercises, her body says, "Let's eat." To counteract the increased desire to eat, make sure to drink water and have healthy snacks available such as chopped fruits and vegetables.

Finally, in a study looking at the weigh-in habits of about 1,800 dieting adults, results indicated that people who weighed themselves every day lost an average of 12 pounds over two years, while weekly scale watchers lost only 6 pounds. People who weighed themselves daily also were less likely to regain lost weight. If you decide to weigh yourself each day, do it first thing in the morning, always undressed or dressed with the same amount of clothes on for consistency. Remember that weight naturally changes a little every day.

The trick is to stay true to yourself without resenting your partner for not participating in the same way as you or not achieving equal results. If you are determined to lose weight and get in shape and your partner doesn't want to join you, take responsibility for yourself, focus on your own progress to stay on track and don't preach or pester the other person to join you.