

# Maintaining a Healthy Weight

## The 3 S's of Success

-- By Dean Anderson, Behavioral Psychology Expert

What leads to success at weight loss and long-term weight management? According to research, the psychological component of the puzzle involves three things: **self-efficacy**, **self-monitoring**, and **support**—the Three S's of Success. Let's take a look at what these three concepts look like in real life, and how you can make them part of your own weight management toolkit.

### Self-Efficacy: The Crucial Ingredient

Self-efficacy is the belief that you *can* do what is required of you to achieve an objective. Self-efficacy is to successful weight management as the best start in a 2-yard dash is to winning the race—without it, you're in big trouble. If you lack self-efficacy, you might not be able (or willing) to put in the sustained effort required to lose weight and keep it off permanently. But when you do have self-efficacy, you'll be able to view the little setbacks and bad days as interesting challenges to overcome. And more importantly, you'll be able to transform these experiences into opportunities to learn more about yourself and become increasingly more skillful—instead of watching helplessly as problems erode your motivation to continue.

For now, we'll assume that your sense of self-efficacy regarding permanent weight loss is not very high. Maybe you've lost and regained weight so many times that you can't honestly tell yourself you can keep it off and really *believe* it. Maybe you have a tendency to begin diets with high expectations and great intentions, hoping for that magic ingredient, but give up quickly when you realize it isn't going to be as easy as you thought. Or maybe you have one particular habit—like emotional eating or lack of exercise—you haven't been able to get a handle on, no matter what you've tried. What can you do now to increase your sense of self-efficacy, and move past these problems?

**Start by recognizing that self-efficacy comes easily and naturally to human beings.** It is part and parcel of our innate programming that allows (and even drives us) to master developmental tasks from infancy through old age. Learning from our experiences and adjusting our behaviors accordingly is a natural process. We have to learn how not to let our failures and difficulties get the best of us—that doesn't come naturally. How many kids do you know who let a few falls prevent them from learning to walk?

Some life experiences can make it more difficult for a person to develop a conscious and realistic sense of self-efficacy in one or more areas of adult life. *This does not mean your capacity to do so is gone forever*—you may just need to go out of your way to reconnect this innate ability to your weight loss efforts. Here how:

1. **Get out of your own way.** The biggest obstacle to developing a realistic sense of self-efficacy is an inability to use your own experiences (both positive and negative) to make appropriate adjustments in thought and behavior. When it comes to permanent weight loss, research indicates that persistent failure to learn from experience is most often associated with the inflexible, pessimistic, and self-defeating “explanatory style”.
2. **Know what self-efficacy is and isn’t.** Self-efficacy is not the same thing as self-esteem (feeling good about yourself), self-confidence (general faith in your abilities), or “cockeyed optimism” (a matter of persuading yourself that all things are possible if you work hard). These traits won’t help you develop self-efficacy or substitute for it.

Self-efficacy is very task-specific. It’s about believing that you can do particular things necessary to accomplish a specific goal, such as permanent weight loss. You can have both high and low senses of self-efficacy in different areas, such as parenting or career, but this will not automatically transfer to the domain of weight loss.

You build self-efficacy for permanent weight loss gradually, as you successfully move through a process of breaking down your ultimate weight loss goal into positive, specific, and realistic short-term goals. Then you identify and master daily behaviors, techniques, and attitudes that will allow you to achieve these goals. With each successful step down this path, you prove to yourself that you CAN transform your lifestyle into one that is consistent with maintaining a healthy weight.

3. **Take the initiative.**

Understanding that simply “following instructions” does not help build self-efficacy. You have to take initiative: identify your own strengths, weaknesses, and needs; tailor your program to suit your individual needs; and regularly take a reasonable, non-judgmental look at the quality of your effort. If you continue to encounter the same problems or patterns—especially if this drains your motivation and confidence—consider the possibility that you’re not taking *enough* initiative. There are lots of small things that will positively affect your initiative and self-efficacy:

- **Take responsibility for your own education.** If you’re having problems or having trouble understanding concepts, don’t ignore it. Instead, fully utilize the resources of your coach to pinpoint your problem and get the answers and support you need.
- **Share your successes and problems with other members.** Participate vicariously in the successes of others, and/or let them take part in yours. When you see that others have succeeded or overcome problems you’re struggling with, it’s easier to believe that you can do it too. Likewise,

when your story or advice has helped someone else, your self-efficacy gets a real boost.

### **Self-Monitoring: Moving from Diet to Lifestyle**

Self-monitoring involves: 1) accurately observing and interpreting your behavior, and 2) learning how to use your observations to modify your behavior and attitude. At some point, most people who struggle with weight realize that there is another dimension to self-monitoring to be mastered. To put it bluntly, there is a big difference between *knowing* how to lose weight and keep it off, and actually *doing* so. To become successful, **most of us need to change our basic beliefs, priorities, and values that affect the eating and activity patterns we want to change.** This step separates a “diet” from a lifestyle change, therefore requiring different self-monitoring techniques and tools.

Take a look at the reasons you give for not doing what you know you should—this is the easiest way to discover how your priorities and values affect your weight. Then ask yourself whether these reasons are out of your control, or whether they’re excuses to avoid responsibility. We tend to be either too easy or too hard on ourselves during self-examination, so enlisting the help of a friend is beneficial.

Take a look at these common reasons dieters give for not meeting calorie and exercise goals, and follow the advice for each that will help you change your priorities:

1. **“I’m too busy,” “Putting time into this takes time away from family or work,” or “I have no choice.”**

On some days skipping a workout or not sticking to your food plan really is the best choice. But this should be the exception—not the rule. If you find yourself frequently using these reasons to put off your weight loss commitments you may be turning a manageable problem into an excuse. Consider these points:

- **People who fail to take care of themselves become less able to keep up with other responsibilities.** Symptoms of burnout include irritability, resentment, feeling overwhelmed or helpless, getting easily upset over small things, fatigue, and an increase in minor health problems (colds, muscle aches, headaches, etc.). How is this going to help you meet your responsibilities?
- **There is a big difference between authentic and unhealthy dependencies.** People in families and organizations count on others to be responsible, reliable, and available, but not to do what others should do for themselves. Unhealthy dependency will grow as long as you allow it. One of the best ways to avoid this is to behave as a model of good responsibility to self and responsibility to others.

- **Everyone gets the same 24 hours in every day**, and we all decide how to spend them. Sure, you need to work and make money, take care of the kids, give quality time to loved ones, manage your affairs, and somehow get enough sleep to do all this again tomorrow. It isn't easy to squeeze in healthy meals and exercise. But it's rarely true that you have no choice—thinking this way is a one-way ticket to someplace you don't want to be.

Take a look at how you spend your time. Is there really no time you could spend differently? Is it possible to make physical activity part of family time? Maybe you chill out for a couple hours in front of the boob tube (or chat online or on the phone), but you could fit in 20 minutes of exercise just by doing some calisthenics during the commercials, couldn't you? Maybe the job you have right now is taking up too much of your time, and isn't the best one for you at this point in your life. What you do every day usually comes down to a question of priorities. Where does your own health and well-being fit into your priorities?

2. **“I'm just too tired,” or “I don't have the energy to shop, cook, or exercise.”**  
Again, this might be an accurate assessment—if a new baby keeps you up all night, or if you spent the whole day moving into a new house, or refinishing the living room floor. But keep in mind that there are several causes of tiredness, and a little exercise is often the best cure for many of them.

Most of us experience tiredness related to our mental or emotional states rather than actual physical exhaustion. Mental or emotional exhaustion is the product of a stressful day that may very well have been sedentary. If so, then some exercise and a healthy homemade meal may be just what you need to put that stress behind you and reclaim your energy. The hardest part is getting up and getting started. Once you get moving, you'll feel invigorated right away—that's why Mother Nature invented endorphins. So don't let a tired mind talk you out of doing what's best for you!

3. **“What's the point? I've been sticking to my diet and exercise plan for months and have hardly lost anything. This isn't working.”**  
Is this just the voice of Frustration talking, or is this what you really believe? Weight loss is not an exact science, because we are unique individuals—physiologically, psychologically, and otherwise. This means no one can give you a program that's going to work exactly as planned, all the time. You need to take the initiative to adapt general information and proven strategies to your individual needs. Even with your coach to help you sort out problems you encounter, some amount of frustration is normal and unavoidable. You're the only one who can decide whether you'll let frustration stop you from reaching your goals.

Plus, regular exercise and healthy eating offer you a long list of important health benefits even when the scale isn't changing as fast as you'd like. In 99.9% of

cases, failure to lose weight “on schedule” does not mean you can’t reach your goal weight. It only means that you need to do some experimenting to find the right combination of strategies for you.

In summary, a true lifestyle change usually involves changing the beliefs, values, and priorities that have enabled you to become overweight in the first place. Learning to monitor not only what goes in your mouth, but also what is going on in your mind and heart, are keys to making a permanent lifestyle change.

### **Support: Glue that Holds it All Together**

This whole weight management series has really been about **support**—the kind we get from experts and others who have walked in our shoes, the kind we give to ourselves, and the kind we give to each other. You know it’s almost impossible to lose weight permanently on your own. Research shows that people do a lot better when they participate in a program that has a social support component (online or face-to-face both work), and when they have an active support network of family and friends.