

Strong Women Don't Starve

Elaine Mansfield (adapted by FitnessLand)

Introduction

Twenty percent of women between 20 and 30 years old are overweight. By the time we reach 50, over half are overweight. Many of us torture ourselves with calorie-restricted diets, desperately trying to drop those pounds. After the weight comes off, it usually comes right back on.

Dieting destroys our metabolisms, as well as our self-confidence. When we lose fat through severe dieting, we also lose muscle. When we regain lost weight, we usually gain more fat than muscle. Because a pound of muscle burns 25-40 calories a day, while a pound of fat burns only 1-3 calories, we need fewer calories as the percentage of body fat goes up with each round of weight loss. If we want to maintain a healthy weight without starving, we need our muscle. Every time we go on a severe calorie restricted diet of 1200 or even 1400 calories a day, our body interprets the diet as famine and lowers our metabolism to conserve every ounce of fat and flesh. According to Dr. Miriam Nelson in *Strong Women Stay Slim*, "between the starvation effect and muscle loss, the wrong diet can reduce your metabolic rate by up to 30 percent."

A Personal History

I went on my first weight loss diet when I was 13. Like many teenage girls, I was horrified by my developing curves, especially those thighs, but photos show that I was not overweight. I don't remember how much weight I lost on that first diet. I do remember effusive praise from my mother. She didn't think I was really fat, but she feared a tendency was there and honored me for beginning the battle. I was a girl with a healthy appetite for good food — vegetables, fruit, meat and poultry, even whole wheat bread. I hated being hungry. I was also a girl with a prodigious will, so I dieted strenuously, punishing my body to lose each pound.

I lost weight—many times. Perhaps ten diets by the time I was 20 years old and ten more by 30. Then ten more diets by the time I was 50, at 1200 calories a day rather than the 600-800 calorie starvation diets of my twenties. When I wasn't dieting, I was gaining weight. Each time I lost weight, I gained it back more easily.

Weight Loss and Aerobic Exercise

Around 1960 when I was 15, my mother took me to a prestigious clinic to get a healthy low calorie diet. The doctor didn't think I needed to lose weight, but my mother and I disagreed. The formula for his diet was excess calories = excess weight. Reduce calories to 1200 per day and reduce weight. He never mentioned exercise.

I existed on cottage cheese and hunger. By the 1970s, the news was out that aerobic exercise was a necessary ingredient. Reduced calories + increased aerobic exercise = weight loss. I began walking and hiking. By the 1980s, I was an advocate of the aerobic exercise principles taught by Covert Bailey in his popular book *Fit or Fat*. I walked for 45 minutes 6 days a week and suggested low to moderate intensity aerobic exercise for my nutrition clients. (You'd be surprised how many people study nutrition because they need to solve their own nutrition problems!).

Unfortunately, it didn't work. Even when the scale showed my target weight, I was getting fatter, and I had to eat starvation rations to maintain weight. I continued gaining and losing, unaware that, despite aerobic exercise, I was losing metabolically active lean muscle each time I lost weight. I did not understand that increasing my muscle mass was the best way to make permanent changes in my daily caloric needs.

Weight loss and Strength Training

Two years ago, with this forty-year history of dieting disaster, everything changed. I ate 1700 calories a day for eight months, lost 30 pounds, and haven't been on a diet since. I slowly added more healthy food and now eat 2200-2500 calories a day in three meals and three snacks.

When I'm hungry, I eat. I weigh less than 120 lbs [55 kilos], healthy and strong for my short height. This is the same amount I weighed when I began torturing my metabolism with low calorie diets as a girl. What happened?

I realized that constant hunger and a daily walk were not adequate solutions. I focused on fostering good health and gave up expectations for quick results. I stopped starving my body, treating it as an object in need of perfection, and I listened to my body's natural appetites. I lifted weights.

Digging beneath popular literature, as well as what I'd learned in college nutrition classes, I discovered that dieting causes loss of muscle and slows the metabolism. I learned that strength training brings positive metabolic and muscular changes, no matter what age or what shape you're in. It made sense.

I began strengthening my muscles cautiously, using dumbbells and resistance bands. Within a few months, I replaced my resistance bands with free weights [hand held weights]. By Strong Women standards, I'm not extremely muscular, but I continue to get stronger on a routine of 14 exercises divided into two 45-60 minute sessions a week. It's not much of an investment for the rewards I get.

How To Reach and Keep A Healthy Weight

Begin With Mental Changes. Stop expecting quick solutions to a long-term problem. Look for a slow but lasting transformation. Stand in front of a mirror and say something positive about your body every day. Does the very thought make you uncomfortable? Isn't it interesting that we're comfortable studying the mirror for every minor flaw, all the while sending ourselves messages of criticism and self-disgust, while it makes us squirm to say one nice thing to ourselves a day?

Appreciate your miraculous body all day, no matter what your weight. Become conscious of the negative messages you send your body. No wonder it's not behaving like a good friend! The media encourages us to despise our bodies, enticing us to buy commercial products to correct the unending list of supposed flaws. We've bought into it. Our mothers bought into it. Our grandmothers bought into it. If you don't believe me, read *The Body Project* by Joan Jacobs Brumberg.

Don't obsess about your weight. You've tried that, so why not give it up? Don't substitute obsessing about your weight with obsessing about your percentage of body fat. Your body will change dramatically as you slowly transform fat into muscle. Weigh or measure yourself just once a month, relying instead on the loosening fit of your clothes.

Become conscious of our cultural obsession with skinny women and look at the women in advertising with a more critical eye. They are frail and unhealthy, easy to push around. Is that what we're after? Then remember that all those perfect bodies are air brushed and photographically manipulated. Real bodies aren't perfect. Go for health and strength, and forget perfection.

Exercise Is Your Ally

Lift weights twice a week, progressively and with moderate to high intensity. Being overweight does not prevent you from excelling at strength training. You can get stronger and begin converting bulky fat to lean tissue without losing a pound, and this alone will change the shape of your body.

If you're new to high intensity training, read through the archives of Strong Women Q&A (<http://www.cyberpump.com/members/strongwomen/>).

Note: Ask Victor for the Username and Password to access the above-mentioned material.

If you've never lifted before and feel cautious or skeptical, machines can be helpful. If you want to work out at home, look at the simple beginner's exercises in Strong Women Stay Young by Miriam Nelson or even start with resistance bands, but don't stay with these beginner's routines for more than a few months. They get you started, but won't take you as far as free weights or good exercise machines.

Focus your strength training on compound exercises (exercises that use many muscle groups at the same time). Many women spend hours working on small muscles like the biceps and triceps. This does little to build overall muscle mass. Use compound exercises like squats, deadlifts, pulldowns, dips, and abdominal work. These exercises build the largest muscles of the body and bring about the metabolic changes we're after.

Don't expect strength training to change your metabolism over night. Remember, there are no quick fixes. I felt stronger and more self-confident and vital within weeks, but the most significant metabolic changes became noticeable after 6 months.

Do a moderate intensity aerobic workout two or three times a week for about thirty minutes. This is good for your cardiovascular health and helps burn calories. I walk steep hills to get my heart pumping. Many women enjoy running or biking. If you're extremely out of shape, you might have more success if you strength train for a month before adding aerobics. Being overweight will not hamper your growing muscles, and strength will help you gain confidence in your body.

It's easier to walk briskly if your muscles are awake. Be physically active every day. Take walks for the joy of it. Meet a friend for a hike and bike or swim with your family. Spend part of your lunch hour walking if you have a sedentary job. Take the stairs instead of elevators. Dance in the living room. Play. Just keep moving.

Realize Your Goals With Good Nutrition

Honour your body by nurturing it with healthy natural food — fresh vegetables, whole grains, fruits, dairy and protein sources, and healthful mono and polyunsaturated oils. Protect your precious body from junk foods, saturated fats, hydrogenated oils, and excess sugar. If you have a sweet tooth, try healthier sweets like yogurt instead of cake. Splurge on exotic fruits like mangoes or fresh pineapple. Go to my web site (<http://www.lightlink.com/elaine>) for more information about healthy nutrition. Also look at Commonsense Nutrition Q&A (<http://www.cyberpump.com/qna/commonsense.html>).

Eat frequently. Six times a day works well. I know that sounds alarming if you're used to being hungry, but if you plan healthy snacks between meals, you won't be crazed with hunger at meal time. Eat a healthy protein snack with whole grains or fresh fruit mid morning, mid afternoon, and before bed. Drink lots of water and/or herb tea, 8 cups or more a day. Your urine should be pale yellow. Keep caffeine to a minimum; it dehydrates the body and keeps us out of touch with the body's natural appetite. Hydrating your body will help you develop a healthy appetite you can trust, and it does wonders for many health problems, like dry skin and constipation.

Don't ignore your body when it's hungry even if you think you've eaten enough. Respond with a high protein snack, and you may find you eat less at the next meal. Real hunger is real communication, your body's wisdom speaking to you. Respect your body's messages. You may have developed the habit of responding to hunger with sweets. If you crave sweets, try protein instead and watch what happens to that craving.

Loose weight slowly. I hear you screaming in protest. I know this idea is challenging, but how many times have you said, "I have to lose this weight fast, right now, this week?" How many times have you read magazine articles that promised a miraculous weight loss in just ten days? How many times have you or your friends lost weight only to gain it back, along with extra fat? If you lose weight slowly, you'll never have to lose it again, and if you lose weight slowly, it won't interfere with what you're really trying to do — be strong and energetic, develop a firm and shapely body, and repair your metabolism.

Remind yourself every day that you won't be able to make the metabolic changes you're after if you get in a hurry and restrict your food intake too much. A 1995 article from the Journal of Applied Physiology showed that resistance training can increase the resting metabolic rate, but only if there is no severe calorie restriction. If we insist on eating 1200 calories or less a day, even weight training will not save our floundering metabolism

Severe calorie restriction is making women fatter, digging us deeper into the pit of low metabolism, low muscle mass, and high body fat. In order to lose weight permanently, we need to eat adequate amounts of nourishing food and increase our muscle mass. Let's get strong and start listening to our hungry bodies.

Elaine Mansfield has been a nutrition counselor for twenty years, teaching natural approaches to disease prevention and women's health care in New York. She combines her experience in holistic health and fitness with interests in women's psychology and spirituality.