

Record-Keeping Can Keep You on Track

The purpose of record keeping is for you to discover the conditions under which you eat and to gain understanding of the personal meaning of your obesity problem. You may be largely unaware of eating patterns which are contributing to your problems with achieving and maintaining weight loss. As you keep your daily Diet Logs, you will probably notice definite patterns of problem eating. For example, problem eating often occurs in response to negative emotional arousal. Other problem-eating categories you might notice include celebration eating, between-meal snacking, social eating, and eating stimulated by the presence of food cues. As you review your records at the end of each week, try to classify the type of eating problems you notice so you can pay particular attention to the cognitive-behavioral strategies relevant to your personal problem patterns. Make sure that you understand the importance of accurate record-keeping for facilitating permanent weight control through lifestyle change. The one feature that all cognitive-behavioral weight-control programs have in common is the requirement that participants keep records of their eating behavior. Record-keeping is considered important for several reasons:

- A. First, and most important, records of eating patterns increase the awareness of how overeating occurs. Analysis of records over time will help you identify trouble spots in your lifestyle that result in excessive food intake. It is in this sense that behavioral records differ from the calorie counting used in other diets. The calories consumed and the types of food consumed are of less importance than the circumstances surrounding food consumption. By altering the circumstances, the end result (overeating) can be reduced and lasting lifestyle changes can be accomplished.
- B. Second, records increase the accuracy of your self-perceptions regarding your eating behavior. Studies have shown that overweight individuals often underestimate the quantities of foods that they consume. They also tend to judge their weekly progress solely on the basis of their dietary indiscretions. Accurate records help to put their eating behavior in proper perspective. For example, one person might state that she “blew it” during the week because of a “cookie binge.” Going over her records, this individual might discover that she actually ate only three cookies on one day during the week! She formed a global impression of her behavior (“I’m out of control”; “I’m bad”; “I’m a failure”) that is inaccurate and over generalized. A review of her daily Diet Logs for the week could help her cognitively restructure the experience so that she realized her efforts during the week have, in fact, been quite effective.
- C. Third, records provide the data for evaluating the effectiveness of any behavioral strategies that you use. For example, the only way to determine if slowing down your rate of eating helps to reduce total food intake is for you to keep records of your use of this strategy, the food that you consume, and your weight loss over time. Based on these records, you could draw one of four conclusions:

1. You used the strategy, and you were able to decrease your food intake and lose weight.
2. You used the strategy, but your eating behavior and weight remained unchanged.
3. You did not follow through on your intended use of the strategy, so eating behavior and weight remained unchanged.
4. You did not follow through on your intended use of the strategy, but your food intake and weight decreased anyway.

Each of these conclusions has implications for future behavior-change efforts. For example, if conclusion 1 is true, you will want to continue your use of this strategy. If conclusion 3 is true, however, you cannot yet say whether slowing down your rate of eating will help you control your food intake and weight. You would need to use the strategy during the following week, collect more data, and make a re-evaluation.

- D. Finally, behavioral research suggests that record-keeping is reactive in nature; that is, keeping records alone increase the likelihood that you will follow a particular regimen of structured eating. This is probably because records make individuals more accountable for their eating behavior. Many people refrain from excessive eating so that they will not have to record it.

Note: You might be resistant to the ideas of keeping records of your eating behavior and activity level. This may be an indication of your priorities. Refusal to keep records may be an initial indicator of future difficulties in achieving permanent weight control. It may reflect a lack of commitment to making changes in your lifestyle. You may have many quasi-acceptable reasons why you can't record your behavior. Remember, however, that events do not control people. We make choices based on our experience of our environment. If you have no time to keep records, you are making a choice (conscious or not) not to put aside time for this task (time which should amount to about 15 minutes a day). Each individual – not his or her environment – is ultimately responsible for his or her own behavior and its consequences.

Suggestions for Record Keeping:

- A. Time of Day – Are particular times of day more likely to be associated with food intake or urges to eat than others? Evaluate both dietary intake patterns and your urges. By examining the factors associated with your urges, you may be able to identify aspects of your lifestyle that are problematic.
- B. Location – Are you eating/having urges to eat in many areas in your environment? Are certain areas more likely to be associated with unplanned

food intake or urges than others?

- C. Associated Activity – To what extent are unplanned intake episodes/urges to eat linked with various activities in your lifestyle?
- D. Emotions/Thoughts Before – Are certain emotional states more likely to result in unplanned eating/urges to eat than others?
- E. Social – Are unplanned eating episodes/urges to eat more likely to occur when you are alone or when others are present?
- F. Food Type and Amount – What are you eating or drinking? Be as specific as possible. Include portion sizes and any details which might be relevant. For example, if you drink a glass of skim milk, record it as *skim milk*, not *milk*.
- G. Emotions After Eating – Are certain emotional states more likely to occur after planned or unplanned eating than others?
- H. Strategies For Coping With Urges – What are you doing now to cope? How effective are your efforts? It is important to learn what techniques work best for you in coping with the urges you experience. Later on, you can use these same techniques to help yourself maintain your optimal weight.