

Counteracting “Either-Or” Thinking



Most people struggling to lose weight or maintain their weight loss after weight loss surgery have learned from chronic dieting to be either-or thinkers. How many times have you started a diet only to find yourself eating something “off” the diet and saying to yourself, “I blew it, I might as well start tomorrow, or better yet, next Monday.” You are either on the diet or off it, and once you “blow” it, you may as well eat everything in sight until the next time you start the diet. Of course the problem, as we know all too well, is that this pattern repeats itself the next day and before we know it we have been waiting for the diet to start “tomorrow” for months or years. Along with the weight we may have gained over these years, perhaps the more significant problem is how entrenched our either-or thinking has become. We have heard our inner voice say over and over... “If I can’t be perfect, I might as well give up.”

Even after WLS has altered our pattern of failed diets and helped us to turn around our lives and stay on track with our plan for healthy eating for many months, this kind of either-or thinking can derail our ability to continue to stick to these goals after the inevitable slip. Let us look at an example of how this black and white, either-or thinking works... or more aptly, does not work in our struggle to succeed with our comfortable eating plan.

Many people have discovered after WLS that eating breakfast is an important part of their plan for meeting their nutritional goals and emotional needs for food in a new way. We plan to eat a healthy breakfast each day and to eat slowly and chew the food adequately to avoid any digestive problems. Perhaps, for many months we have been able to follow our plan and start out the day eating a healthy breakfast, chewing it slowly. Then one day we have a busy morning and it becomes impossible to find the time to eat breakfast. We run out of the house without eating. The spell is broken and many of us find ourselves in a major funk, vowing to get back on track the next morning.

Well, then the next morning comes and, low and behold, we seem to be once again skipping breakfast. It is likely that we may not have any idea why we could not get ourselves to eat breakfast the next day. This is where the either-or thinking has tripped us up. We need to listen to what we have been saying to ourselves since the missed breakfast and scan our thoughts for either-or thinking, that inner voice that says, “I blew it this morning. I am off the track. I didn’t do it right. I can’t stick to the plan” “If I can’t do this right (perfectly) I might as well not even try.” Unfortunately the logical conclusion to thinking that is black and white—that says you are either following the plan—a success—or off the plan, a failure, is to abandon the plan.

How can we help ourselves counteract the either-or thinking that undermines our goals for eating?

We tend to make goals that we think of as fixed rules from which we cannot stray. In order

to be able to follow through on these plans even when we make some mistakes, it is helpful to make goals that leave room for error and support the awareness that no one can be perfect.

We need to change our negative, either-or thinking using a process that we call reframing the thoughts. First, we locate and identify how our pattern of either-or thinking, has manifested into a negative inner dialogue such as, “I did not stick to the plan this morning, I have failed and there is no point in even trying.” Then, we look for some alternatives to this black and white message to ourselves. We find the grey area that allows for a better outcome with our eating plan. We reframe the either-or thoughts to: “I missed breakfast this morning, but that happens sometimes, I am doing very well, and I will be able to go back to the plan tomorrow.” The old thought, however, will continue to surface and we must be on the lookout for how easily we slip back into the hold of the either or mindset.

Often reframing your thoughts in your mind is not enough to change the old patterns of thinking. It is helpful to utilize a written affirmation process. Take a piece of paper and fold it down the middle. On the left side, write the reframed, positive thought: “I am doing very well and will be able to go back to eating a healthy breakfast tomorrow.” Then next to it on the right side of the paper, write your doubts and objections, such as: “I failed and I always fail.” Continue writing the positive affirmation on the left side until the voice of objections on the right side of the paper has lost its strength.

Daily affirmations will enable you to correct the faulty either or thinking and help to bring you the success that you want and deserve.



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