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The Women in the Mirror

“Weight loss is an easily won war if you are willing to fight each battle, step by step, for the rest of your life.”

–Randy Crawford, Ohio State Center for Wellness and Prevention

January 2004

I attempt to squeeze into a size XL button-down shirt. When it refuses to fit, I fling it against the wall and crumple to the floor of the dressing room, blinking back tears. The truth in the mirror is crystal clear: at 210 pounds, I am the poster child for the Freshman 15 Gone Wildly Wrong Association. Weight loss is a war, and I’m losing the battle.

In my uniform of oversized sweatpants, I have marched to the rhythm of many a crash-diet routine. I have combined twice-a-day workouts with the latest organic goat cheese and raw juice diet. I have designed elaborate drills to defeat the numbers on the bathroom scale. Even when I craved dessert I did not desert; instead, I settled for frozen water on a stick. Yet here I sit, slumped in defeat.

March 2004

Severely jealous of my slender roommates—and with the memory of that extra-large-but-not-large-enough shirt still fresh in my mind—I search the Internet for help. Here’s a possibility: the Ohio State Center for Wellness and Prevention offers a six-month weight-loss program called Living Well. I decide to attend a meeting. Soon.

May 2004

I finally schlep myself to the Living Well meeting, where I slouch sullenly in my chair as an intervention specialist named Randy Crawford outlines the basics of the program: eat less, move more, record everything.

Following the program is a serious commitment, he explains. With weekly classes, weigh-ins, fitness assessments, and reports, Living Well is not for the faint of weight. I decide I do not like it, or him. Then I remember again the debacle in the dressing room. Suddenly, six months of torture by nutrition and exercise sounds appealing.

June through September 2004

Living Well’s main principle, moderation, teaches me that desperation plus deprivation does not equal motivation. Before I started the program, I was spinning in circles on the diet merry-go-round: deprive myself, binge, crash and burn. Now, with moderation in mind, I have strategies to help me enjoy food responsibly:

1. *The three-bite exception.* Allow myself three teaspoon-sized bites of any food I crave.

2. *Break day.* Declare one day each week a diet-free zone.

3. *Sweet substitutions.* Trade in regular foods for lower-calorie counterparts.

Baby steps slowly bring me closer to my goal. I do 20 minutes of cardio, then add another minute every other workout. Gradually, I move into weight training and yoga. When I get discouraged, Randy reminds me to celebrate every small success. I now pursue progress instead of perfection.

October 2004 through December 2005: Picture this period of my life as an inspirational film. Upbeat music plays over gauzy montages of me exercising (sweat-free and smiling), choosing veggies over pizza, high-fiving a friend as I step off the scale.

Unfortunately, the real-life mechanics are decidedly un-inspirational. I exercise, I choose food wisely, I exchange high-fives, but in a frowning, grunting sort of way. There are flashes of joy—the first time my old jeans fit again, the look on my ex-boyfriend’s face, the steadily decreasing numbers on the scale—but there is more hard work than fun.

January 2006: Approximately 548 days (but who’s counting?) after starting the Living Well program, I reach my goal. I’ve lost 75 pounds I’ve burned a total of 262,500 calories, which averages to a manageable 480 calories per day—the equivalent of taking a brisk 30-minute walk and choosing water instead of a large soda afterward. I’ve had many off-days, but as I announce to Randy, “You just have to be in it for the long haul.”

January 2007: “You look great in this picture, but who’s the fat blond chick?” asks my uncouth neighbor. When I tell him the thin brunette is my sister and the “fat blond chick” is me in 2004, he turns 10 shades of red. I laugh: “It’s amazing what an 75-pound weight loss and your natural hair color can do for you!”

January 2009: With shirt in hand, I step into the dressing room. Five years ago, I was slumped tearfully on the floor of a cubicle much like this one. Now, with the help of Living Well, I’ve traded my impossible dream of overnight weight loss for reachable, long-term goals and lifelong health. Today, I look in the mirror and stand tall.

Learn more:

www.medicalcenter.osu.edu/patientcare/healthcare_services/weight_management/support and click on “Weight Management”