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Whether dieters reach their goal or barely lose a pound, the day almost always comes when they go off the diet. Although this break can mark the beginning of a downward spiral that sends a person right back to the starting point, studies now show it doesn't have to. In fact, taking a break need not have any long-term effect on weight loss at all. The key is how you handle your time "off the wagon."

The first step in managing these lapses is to overcome your guilt. For example, one study compared weight loss among people in a 14-week continuous program with people who took a six-week break midway or several two-week breaks. Although the programs with breaks slowed or temporarily stopped weight loss, the total reduction among the different programs at five and 11 months was the same. During breaks, participants ceased to diet, keep records and check their weight, but continued to exercise. This study suggests that a break from weight loss efforts can work if you avoid negative, self-critical thought, like "I knew I didn't have enough self-discipline to do this." Also notice that a break can be partial. Like the participants in this study, you could halt diet rules and still exercise.

Making exercise a habit seems to be essential for long-term weight control success. Experts at the American College of Sports Medicine say to exercise at least two-and-a-half hours a week. They claim, however, that three to five hours a week is better for long-term weight maintenance. For good health and cancer prevention, the American Institute

for Cancer Research recommends an hour a day of exercise. By itself, exercise is not enough for weight loss. In one study, a 16-month exercise program without diet advice helped women hold a steady weight, but produced no decrease in weight.

Another important part of long-term weight loss is “relapse prevention training.” If you’re dieting, you need to think ahead to situations, like family celebrations, arguments and television watching, that undermine your weight loss efforts. Studies show that those who can create more ways to cope with tough situations lose more weight. The recommended approach involves learning to see multiple ways to respond to a problem, not just one or two.

Learning to handle emotions and negative thought patterns is also vital. In one study, women who regained weight had a tendency to regulate their mood with eating. It is necessary to deal with mood swings and other emotional and mental problems without turning to food. Weight loss often does not solve all the problems people hope it will. For example, those who emphasize their weight and shape in judging their self-worth may struggle with self-esteem. This matter requires its own attention.

As difficult as it may seem to continue healthier behaviors, over time they become easier. So take a break when you need to, but don’t let habits slide so much that lost weight is regained. Women who lose weight and regain it are unlikely to lose it again, according to another recent study.

If you need help to improve your eating habits and prevent weight gain, *Shape Your Future...Your Weigh!*TM can help. Contact your local base Health and Wellness Center (HAWC) or Dietitian for more information.