

USA TODAY
Mar 6, 2014, p. B.5

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Weight Loss Crucial, Tough, for Teenagers

By Nanci Hellmich
USA TODAY

- *Self-esteem and health concerns are key motivators*

Olivia Tilini was inspired to lose 55 pounds after she went to her doctor for a routine checkup.

At the time, she weighed 225 pounds and was a junior in high school. She's 5-foot-10.

"He said I was overweight, and if I continued with my eating habits, I would eventually develop diabetes and need to take insulin," says Tilini, 18, who is now studying public health at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. "I didn't want to stick myself with a needle."

The summer after her junior year, when she was 16, Tilini focused on losing weight. She walked 4 to 8 miles every morning with her mother and played racquetball in the evenings with her family. She also did the Insanity DVDs, a high-intensity workout program.

She started eating healthier by cutting back on chips, greasy foods and sweets and reducing portion sizes, but she didn't count calories, carbs or grams of fat. In five months, she lost 55 pounds and weighed 170. She has kept it off ever since by eating healthy and working out every day.

Tilini is a member of the Adolescent Weight Control Registry, a project of weight-loss researchers at Brown University. They are studying the behaviors of people ages 14 to 20 who have lost 10 pounds or more and kept it off at least a year. So far, 44 teens have signed up for the registry, and about 75% are female. Registry members were about 16 when they decided to lose weight, and dropped an average of 30 pounds.

Preliminary results show that teens who lost weight were motivated more by the desire to feel better about themselves and get healthier than by social pressure or parental encouragement, says Elissa Jelalian, one of the founders of the registry and an associate professor of psychiatry and human behavior at Brown.

Those motivations, along with a supportive environment at home, lead to successful weight loss, she says. Overall, most exercised regularly, ate more fruits and vegetables, reduced portion sizes, and cut back on sweets and sugar-sweetened beverages.

Obesity is a problem for teens and young adults. Extra pounds put them at a greater risk of developing debilitating diseases, including type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure and cholesterol.

Heavy teenagers often experience huge weight gain in their 20s, according to one study. Recent statistics show that only one in four adolescents ages 12 to 15 are physically active for at least 60 minutes daily, which is the government's recommendation.

Rena Wing, another founder of the registry and a professor of psychiatry at Brown University, says parents frequently ask her how to help overweight teens. Although parents shouldn't nag their kids about their weight, they do need to be supportive by making sure they don't bring junk food into the home, she says.

Parents have to buy healthy foods and beverages; the young person has to decide that they are going to eat healthier, she says.

Tilini says her parents did that. Her mother started cooking healthier foods. Her mom and brother lost weight, too. Her advice to other young people who are struggling with their weight: "Never give up. You have to put all your focus into weight loss. Do whatever it takes. It's so worth it. You feel so good about yourself."

Citation:

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Hellmich, Nanci. "Weight Loss Crucial, Tough, for Teenagers." *USA TODAY*. 06 Mar. 2014: B.5. *SIRS Issues*

Researcher. Web. 15 Aug. 2014.

Hellmich, N. (2014, Mar 06). Weight loss crucial, tough, for teenagers. *USA TODAY* Retrieved from <http://sks.sirs.com>

Accessed on 08/15/2014 from SIRS Issues Researcher via SIRS Knowledge Source <<http://www.sirs.com>>

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