

Why We Fall Off the Weight Loss Wagon

by Jonny Bowden, M.A., C.N.S.

I recently received an e-mail on my radio show asking the following question: "How come even old diet veterans have such a hard time [staying on the healthy eating track](#)?"

The writer went on to detail her own personal battles with food with certain situations being particularly problematic. For her, these situations included being on vacation, [eating with her family](#) and, especially, attending social events.

Her question is profoundly familiar to anyone who has ever struggled with weight. This was a person who had had great success with a particular diet, yet she kept falling off the wagon. And once she did, she found it difficult to get back on track. She wondered if I had any thoughts on the subject.

Sure I do. And one of them is this: *I think it's darn near a miracle that it doesn't happen more often.*

Here's why: There are powerful forces that can often seem to be conspiring to work against you when you try to change your eating behavior patterns.

Fortunately, understanding these forces can help lessen their power over you. Here are the top five reasons we stray from our diets and some thoughts on each of them:

1. Habits and conditioning

Eating behavior becomes conditioned from the moment we're out of the womb. Food is strongly associated with all kinds of social situations, rituals, places, people and emotions—not the least of which is comfort. Those responses don't just "go away" in a few weeks or even months. You might as well expect that there are going to be times when a particular constellation of those factors—people, places, things and emotions—will simply overwhelm even the best intentions.

2. Food allergies or hypersensitivities

This is what's behind the "betcha-can't-eat-just-one" syndrome. The very foods that we are sensitive to produce a response in the body that is followed by the release of endorphins, the body's own natural painkillers. Those endorphins make you feel good, and it's easy to become addicted to foods that do that. They're like cigarettes to a smoker. Cigarettes aren't good for the body, and the first time you smoke one you choke. But once you adapt to the "damage," you're hooked. And if you quit smoking and start again, what happens? You crave them all the time. And the foods that cause the most problems are usually the same foods that are most tempting during outings, vacations and other events.

3. Brain chemistry

Our desires for food are strongly influenced by neurotransmitters such as serotonin. When serotonin levels are depressed or depleted for various biological reasons, we're subject to cravings (the [candy craving](#) many women experience during PMS is a prime example). Stress plays a part too, as high levels of cortisol (a stress hormone) can cause us to crave carbohydrates.

4. Genetic factors

Although we're far from having a complete understanding of this one, there is virtually no one on the planet who doesn't believe that lurking in the genome are at least some genes that influence appetite and weight gain. There is undoubtedly a genetic component that makes it easier for certain people to put weight on and harder for those same people to lose it. There may be a genetically determined weight range that your body "prefers." And although some people can indeed get out of that range, don't expect to do it without a bit of resistance from the universe.

5. A completely out-of-control toxic food supply

On a yearly basis, you are exposed to somewhere in the neighborhood of 90,000 advertisements for food, most of it horrible for your diet. And that doesn't count the daily [unrelenting exposure](#) to restaurants, malls, food courts, snack machines, buffets, office luncheons, Pizza Huts, Chinese takeout, overflowing supermarket aisles, Starbucks and doughnut shops. The food industry spends hundreds of millions of dollars attempting to make the culinary equivalent of a toxic waste dump seem appealing, refreshing, healthy, fresh and delicious to you, so much that it has actually convinced you that to not eat this junk is "deprivation."

So, are there reasons why people fall off the wagon? You bet there are. But rather than beat yourself up for occasionally giving in to temptation, or for losing "only a couple" of pounds, I would prefer to see you congratulate yourself for what you *have* done, and *are doing*.

In this environment, the fact that you are able to resist junk at all, lose any weight and regain any measure of health is a tribute to your strength and your ability to be empowered!

By the way, there's one other reason, and when it's not attached to [excess baggage](#) from the other five, it's a perfectly fine reason to stray from a diet, and it's also not something I'm sure I want to give up: it's called pleasure. Simply put, there *is* a place for recreational eating and for sampling delicious, sinful treats from time to time. As long as you can make it work for you, as long as it's not compulsive or destructive, as long as it's not being fueled by boredom, sadness, anger or any of the other myriad reasons people eat badly, I say go for it.

I know of no better reason to have a treat.