

The Beck Diet Solution: Train Your Brain to Think Like a Thin Person

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(<http://www.oxmoorhouse.com/>)

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Dieting and weight loss have become multi-billion dollar industries. But perhaps more ubiquitous is the weight regain that often follows initial losses, earning the expression ‘yo-yo dieting’ its own place in our lexicon. *The Beck Diet Solution* addresses the common reasons for diet failures and presents ‘a six-week program for permanent weight loss’.

The premise of the book is that dieters fail to sustain weight loss not because they lack willpower, but because they lack knowledge – knowledge regarding motivation, skills to resist temptations, strategies for coping with lapses, and approaches to appropriate goal-setting. Indeed, failure to maintain initially successful behavioral changes has been identified as predictive of weight regain (e.g., McGuire et al 1999). Throughout the book, Beck calls on her twenty years of experience working with dieters, as well as her own experience, to illustrate her step-by-step approach to weight loss.

The book is organized into three parts. In Part 1 ‘The Power of Cognitive Therapy for Weight Loss’, Beck introduces the reader to the basic tenets of cognitive therapy. Chapter 1 ‘The Key to Success’, describes the Beck Diet Solution as a ‘psychological program, not a food plan’, and provides a brief overview of the history and research supporting cognitive therapy for behavior change. Beck also shares her own struggle and ultimate success with weight loss attempts. Chapter 2 ‘What *really* makes you fat’ focuses on sabotaging thoughts and presents an accessible cognitive model of eating (p. 30), describing the relationship between triggers, thoughts, decisions, and actions. Chapter 3 ‘How thin people think’ describes characteristics typical of individuals who have difficulty losing weight (e.g., confusing hunger and cravings), and presents ‘The Beck Diet Solution’ for each (e.g., learn to recognize hunger by attending to physical sensations, experiment in purposely making oneself hungry). Finally, Chapter 4 ‘How to use the Beck Diet Solution’, suggests a two-week skill building period prior to embarking on any weight-loss attempts, acknowledging that ‘readiness is more complicated than simply wanting to change’ (p. 46).

In Part 2 ‘The Program’, each of chapters 5 through 10 represents one week of the six-week plan. Chapter 5, ‘Get Ready’, focuses on preparing oneself to diet and suggests several cognitive and behavioral strategies that are said to increase the likelihood of successful weight loss. For example, Beck suggests encouraging healthy eating habits by consuming all food sitting down, eating slowly and mindfully, and making changes to one’s home and work environments to minimize temptations. She also addresses fad diets, stating that because all weight loss occurs only through creating an energy deficit, ‘there is no one right diet’ plan (p. 68). The reader is encouraged to consider the pros and cons of set eating plans versus counting systems, and to select two diet plans in case the first one does not work. Unlike most diet plans, Beck draws the reader’s attention to research on the effects of very-low-calorie/rapid weight loss diets, such as slowed metabolic rate, and refreshingly advises a slow and steady approach incorporating periodic indulgences. In Chapter 6 ‘Get Set’, more specific preparatory work is

suggested. For example, the reader is advised to create a schedule, plan menus and an exercise regime, and set short-term, moderate weight loss goals. Strategies such as hunger charting and hunger tolerance are presented, though the concept that ‘you definitely don’t have to eat when you’re hungry’ (p. 122) seems somewhat at odds with the body awareness previously encouraged. Chapter 7 ‘Start your diet’, begins with a description of how to monitor one’s eating and weight, and encourages the reader to change his or her definition of fullness to avoid achieving an overly full sensation (through the opposite problem of habitually eating until one is just barely full is not addressed). In Chapter 8, ‘Responding to sabotaging thoughts’, Beck teaches the reader the fundamentals of cognitive restructuring as applied to common dieting-related distortions. Chapter 9 ‘Overcome Challenges’ provides practical solutions to common self-change obstacles (social pressure to eat, traveling) using illustrative case examples. Finally, Chapter 10 ‘Fine tune your new skills’ addresses long-term weight loss saboteurs such as stress, weight plateaus, and inactivity. Importantly, this chapter addresses one of the most overlooked areas in weight loss – one’s life beyond the diet. In the subsection entitled ‘enrich your life’, Beck draws the reader’s attention to other important goals and relationships, placing weight loss in context. The only regrettable aspect of this section is that it is not longer and even further elaborated.

Part 3 is entitled ‘Going Forward’ and addresses the transition from dieting for weight loss to weight maintenance. In Chapter 11 ‘When to stop losing and start maintaining’, Beck distinguishes between one’s “lowest achievable weight” and “lowest maintainable weight”. In arguably one of the most important sections of the book, Beck discusses how to determine a maintainable weight and how to accept a goal weight that is higher than one’s ideal. Given the notoriously difficult nature of weight loss maintenance (e.g., Stunkard, 1975), it may have been useful to elaborate further on this topic as well as the research regarding physiological versus environmental determinants of body weight, though Beck does highlight several factors that influence one’s weight. Finally, in Chapter 12 ‘How to stay at your new weight’, Beck suggests that continued monitoring and use of the strategies will be necessary to sustain weight loss, stating that returning to the use of hunger and fullness as cues for eating is a risky strategy for long term success, implicitly suggesting that permanent weight loss requires, as one might expect, permanent dieting.

Beck’s indisputable skills as a cognitive therapist are evident throughout the text, and the Beck Diet Solution offers several advantages over typical weight-loss plans. Perhaps most importantly, Beck discourages the typical approach to weight loss (i.e., seeking the fastest route to the lowest possible weight), favoring a slow pace to moderate goals. She explicitly addresses the issue of motivation and readiness, devoting two of the six steps exclusively to preparatory work. The reader is encouraged to gain self-awareness through monitoring and is taught empirically-validated cognitive and behavioral change skills in an easy to understand format. The book also contains straightforward charts and monitoring forms that offer a twist on the usual (e.g., monitoring one’s weight based on increases or decreases from a zero baseline rather than the number on the scale). The case examples will no doubt resonate with many individuals who have struggled with their weight, and the therapists who have worked with them. The book is well-organized, well-written, and draws upon a clear theoretical orientation.

Perhaps one area of weakness lies in the at times incongruous messages presented to the reader. For instance, while Beck is to be commended for advocating mindful eating and body awareness, the book makes several suggestions that appear to suggest discounting one's physical sensations (e.g., "you definitely don't have to eat when you're hungry"; discouraging the use of hunger and fullness as appropriate cues for long-term weight maintenance). Perhaps a healthier alternative would be to suggest that it is always appropriate and acceptable to respond to hunger by eating, with an emphasis on practicing moderation. Further, although the reader is dissuaded from black-and-white thinking (stating that the words 'always' and 'never' should be removed from one's vocabulary), some strategies appear to reinforce rather than discourage such patterns (e.g., the use of a cue card with the statement 'its never okay to eat unplanned'). This has perhaps less to do with the book and more to do with the inherent conundrum of weight loss, as data from the National Weight Control Registry suggest that individuals who maintain weight loss over the long term do so only through constant caloric restriction and high levels of exercise (Phelan et al, 2006). Thus the dieter is left with the conflict of whether to eat mindfully and in accordance with physical hunger cues, or to override his or her physical sensations in favor of adherence to rules to achieve a goal weight. The book does not, and in fairness perhaps cannot, resolve this conflict.

Although Beck briefly addresses eating disorders and states that the plan is inappropriate for individuals with these symptoms (p. 37), a more thorough discussion of how to determine whether weight loss is necessary or appropriate even in the absence of eating disorder symptoms may have been useful. As previously stated, given the difficulty most individuals have in maintaining as opposed to achieving initial losses, the section devoted to weight maintenance could be elaborated upon, though the premise of the preceding strategies is that proper preparatory work mitigates the potential for future lapses.

Finally, although the techniques that form the basis of the book are supported by research, the empirical basis of the six-week Beck Diet Solution for weight loss per se remains to be determined – I look forward to reading the results of controlled studies comparing this to other programs, and dismantling the relative effectiveness of the three components of the program.

References

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