

## HOW I DID IT

### *My Personal Nutrition and Exercise Journey*

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This document is a companion to Author's Research for Finders Keepers.

A before and after slideshow, with comments, can be viewed at [www.flickr.com/kallmaker/sets](http://www.flickr.com/kallmaker/sets)

I must emphasize that this is what worked for me. Every body is different. Everyone will experience every aspect of fitness and nutrition differently. There is no one-size-fits-all. For some, gastric bypass is the most effective and lasting option, for others, strenuous adherence to a single nutrition plan is the only thing that works. The frustrating part is figuring out what it is that works for you when reputable programs give conflicting advice, and slick hucksters promise alluring secret systems that work like a miracle, if you'll just give them a credit card number and expiration date.

A more coherent program and presentation of some of the basic

science of weight loss, exercise, hunger hormones, as well as tangential issues of time management, emotional readiness and investment, are explored in my novel, *Finders Keepers*, so I'm not going to repeat that here. In fiction I was allowed to spare my main character my mistakes!

With marketing of both diet programs that were patently unrealistic and fitness regimens I didn't have a hope of being able to complete, I was discouraged from even trying to change my body and health for years. For a time I wasted money buying things I couldn't use, as if the purchase was enough. Every example of what I needed to do was too radical and the shock to my system was overwhelming. I felt ill, I sprained joints, my heart palpitated... This was expert advice, sold at high prices or in immensely popular books and it didn't work for me. That made me the failure, didn't it? I failed in short order when I did try to change my ways based on these programs, and failed—of course—when I chose to do nothing.

### *Exercise*

Be the tortoise; after all,  
the hare is already skinny.

I am asked “how did you do it” a lot, especially by people who knew me when I weighed almost twice what I do now. My advice is for people who, like me, never exercised, but ate more than their body burned for far too many years. For women like me, who find the prospect of doing anything “athletic” daunting. All the ads for exercise programs and equipment feature razor-thin people — how can they design anything that makes sense for someone who weighs twice what they do? Sure, right, I can do what a 120-pound fitness junkie, who has practiced this routine for countless hours, is doing. Get real! How could fitness possibly apply to me?

The majority of fitness advice out there is about staying fit, not

losing weight—at least in my opinion. Even regimens that promote weight loss as a goal feature already fit people (none of whom look like they have ever been overweight) when they set the goals and speed of their workouts. To me, it's irresponsible—but good marketing—to use models as their demonstrators, giving the average woman a completely skewed notion of what a healthy, sustainable muscle mass really looks like. Anything less than the sculpted, toned physique (combined with flawless skin and chically styled hair) leaves the viewer feeling like somehow she just didn't do it right. Even when she's fit she doesn't look like that. All that work and she still doesn't measure up.

I did what I could, not what someone else told me I ought to be able to do. But the first step was giving myself permission to take the time for something that, at first glance, was something I was doing just for myself. My family needs me, how could I take time from them? I have deadlines, nothing else should be more important. Taking time for myself was selfish, wasn't it? (Raise your hand if you see the enabling behavior inherent in this line of thinking!)

I realized, finally, that the time I was not spending on some kind of fitness program was time I was instead investing in an early death. It's that simple. If you can't find 3-4 hours a week, then you are trading that time for a life you won't have when heart disease arrives in your 60s. Think about the people who count on you and what will happen to them when you're not there—or are health-impaired—when you're 60. I realized I might not be around to see my kids graduate from college, or have kids of their own. My family genetics suggest I may have some health challenges to face as I age – why would I pile heart disease and diabetes on top of those?

So here's my advice, based on my experience, mistakes and successes. It's what I did, in small stages.

Find 3 hours a week for 3 months. Invest in a pair of walking shoes. Six days a week walk as briskly as you possibly can for 30 minutes, or four days a week for 45 minutes—or a combination

thereof, but no less than four days a week. Even if you can't quite believe that you are worth this investment, surely the people who love and count on you deserve it. Do that for three months, do not eat any additional food as a reward. Consider instead, finding and cutting back 100 calories a day; give something up, a small something you can live with.

I know someone for whom walking was a challenge, and she got moving with Richard Simmons' "Sweating to the Oldies" (which *does* feature women with real bodies and challenges). She could stand up and rock her hips and shoulders, and that was more than she had done in years. When my partner broke her ankle, she found "Chair Dancing" which had arm exercises with paper plates and cans of corn – I'm not kidding – that were surprisingly aerobic and therefore very good for her heart.

Whatever it is, find something that you'll actually DO, consistently, no less than 4 days a week for a total of 3 hours a week. Don't invest a lot of money, don't buy some high end challenging exercise DVD that you can't succeed at, not right now. Do not believe in ads that claim a piece of equipment is so amazing that it means you can do in three minutes what otherwise takes thirty. Don't tell yourself you'll do it later, then let the best time of day for you slip by. Don't let your family tell you that you can do it later, either.

Everything I've ever read that was based in scientific research and clinical study agrees: if you can't find three hours each week for something so easy as walking, you're not going to succeed. What's more, and I know this will sound rather brutal, if you want to believe in and spend money on those kinds of claims, you're not ready to do what you're going to have to do. You have to do it, not a machine, not a pill. There is no miracle. Rather, the miracle is you (sing with me, now! oo!)

I admit it: I wanted to believe them. Even now, only chanting "it's a lie, it's a lie" at the television can conquer my wishful thinking.

The truth I didn't want to believe, but now accept: there is no other way to become fit and stay fit except through a regular fitness routine of at least three hours a week. Three hours is the bare minimum. To paraphrase Covert Bailey, any diet program that does not tell you that fact is after your money, not your well-being.

Start slow, start simple. Find those 3 hours. See what happens. Frankly, if you don't see a positive, encouraging change in three months, visit your doctor. Keep some records, show what you've been trying, get some advice. What would a positive, encouraging change be? Your body protests less by week 9 than it did in week 1. You're not breathing as hard and your heart isn't beating quite as fast for the very same exertion. In that same 30 minutes, you're going farther with no extra sweat. That too tight pair of pants seems to have developed some give. Your weight gain trend slows, you don't gain any weight at all, or you even lose weight.

If you're like me, you'll find that by end of the third month, it's not enough activity but the trend you feel is encouraging. Your body has adapted, though, and the trend slows. When the exercise gets easy it is helping you maintain the fitness you've achieved, but it is no longer helping you build your fitness or burn fat. Thank you Mother Nature, I mean, how is more exercise supposed to be a reward for having exercised? Went to whomever will listen about the unfairness of it all (this is an important step!), then invest in some hand or ankle weights. Make walking harder. Then find some gentle hills, and make your heart work a little more. Do what you can, but don't do it all in a week — you can't do it all in a week.

What works for the hares of the world isn't going to  
work for you.

Eventually, I reached a level where I could manage more strenuous exercise without triggering exerciser's asthma or hitting my maximum heart rate so quickly the exercise was over before it did me

a bit of good. Finally, I could do something for my heart and build some endurance, which meant the same investment of time was doing double duty—and that efficiency felt good. If I stepped up the exercise I'd go on burning fat and I'd improve my fitness. For me, the next level of exercise was inline skating. For you it should be something that is diverting, possibly even enjoyable. I like inline skating; it's the only exercise I can say that about.

After inline skating, I added hiking and tackled longer, more vigorous hikes. Up the hills to build endurance, down the hills to burn fat. I tried cycling, but I just didn't find it diverting and fun enough, nor did it seem to be an exercise that burned fat for me. Still, I can bike with my family and keep up, and a stationery cycle has always been around for times of bad weather, though at this point it almost has no impact on my heart rate. Swimming, too, didn't do anything for me. But both activities obviously work for other people.

Finally, when I was fit enough, I took up jogging because my weight had plateaued again, and developed my own "brick" concept, with 1 minute of running followed by 1 minute of brisk walking, for a maximum of 30 minutes. I chased that with 30-45 minutes of rollerblading. The mix provides endurance from the jogging, builds muscle from the duration, and the bulk is done at a low aerobic heart rate, which is where the fat burning happens. That routine is still a two to three times a week effort, with 1-2 hour hikes alone or with family to have a total of 4-5 workouts a week. However, ankle and hip pain suggest I need to find something else for the higher intensity exercise. I may finally, reluctantly, join a gym for access to equipment.

That's where I am now, waiting out the 12-18 months it takes to stabilize and reabsorb empty fat cells that are just hanging around, eager to put the pounds back on. That's right – at the end of the journey there's a quarantine of sorts before you can really figure out how you're going to maintain.

Every once in a while the universe sends a message. One day

when I felt particularly sorry for myself, slogging along the trail where I run, I passed a middle-aged man out walking. He had two crutches and obviously M.S. or some other disorder; every step was an awkward struggle. Where did I get off thinking I had it rough?

### *Nutrition*

If whining burned calories I would be shaped like  
Audrey Hepburn.

The first step, and I mean the very first step, is not to gain any more weight. For me, that was a major victory, and I didn't realize it until long after I'd done it. If I had waited another year to start some kind of program, I would have had 145 pounds to lose, not 130. Newsflash from the Department of DUH: *The easiest weight to lose is the weight you never gain.*

The temptation for me whenever I did any kind of activity out of my normal sedentary life — working at an office job I easily spent 10 hours daily without moving — was to eat more. I could eat and do other things at the same time. Multi-tasking constantly made me reach for food as a treat. Walk a long way from the parking lot to the store and I'd think I should replenish myself with a snack.

When I began to lose weight it was a surprise. I was standing up all day instead of sitting. I took advantage of it after that initial surprise by doing two things that made sense for me nutritionally.

First, I brought no food into my office at home. If I wanted to eat I had to get up, make food, eat it, then I could return to my desk. An open bag of potato chips or candy meant I would eat it all while I worked. (The behavioral science behind quantity available and quantity eaten is fascinating!) Even now, the only food in my office is the supply of my nightly small square of very dark chocolate. While I can't stop eating milk chocolate—seriously, it's like crack cocaine to

me—I have no trouble stopping after a small amount of dark. [And I have learned that if I can't stop eating dark chocolate something else is going on and I need to find out what it is and find another way than food to deal with it. Seasonal/cold weather depression, for example, now means bubble baths, not chocolate.]

Second, I ate nothing after 9 p.m. I was eating more than a third of my far too many daily calories at night, then I would skip breakfast, which is pure sabotage to the metabolism. This step had a trickle down effect: if I wasn't eating snacks at night, I didn't begin eating them during the day. I didn't want them during the day, go figure. I found I needed a small breakfast to start my day, too, and breakfast is universally agreed-upon as a healthy habit.

Those two steps probably eliminated between 500-1200 calories a day from my diet, and I wasn't even hungry. I stopped eating as much as three pounds of mass market chocolate in about two weeks, month in and month out. Lesson learned: I was eating when I wasn't hungry, ergo, I was eating for emotional reasons, which I finally identified and confronted. For a while, I lost weight steadily even though otherwise I was not limiting what I ate, and it was almost easy. Why wouldn't it be when I'd added a tiny bit of activity to my life and eliminated a habit of massive overeating?

Tangential comment: I lost about 45 pounds before anyone noticed. Okay, people noticed, but they didn't say anything, not wanting to give offense by phrasing their praise and encouragement badly. Even now people stumble with "Wow, you look good, I mean, not that you didn't look good before, I mean..." It's okay. I know what they mean.

Another tangential comment: No, I am not saying that all obese women are obese because they ate too much and didn't exercise. That's why I was overweight. I really wanted to believe there was a medical reason for it but somewhere along the way I finally stopped telling myself B.S. Sure, my genes are of the slow variety; I spring from wildebeests, not cheetahs. I've got no more control over that

than I do how tall I am. I can complain that it's not fair some people have cheetah metabolisms, and have another candy bar, or I can deal with what exists: I have to work harder. I ate too much, I sat too much and I have to undo all of that, plus I have to work harder.

I love food. I hate exercise. While I do believe that the food service industry actively encourages unhealthy eating, and that their ads of thin people downing high fat meals made me ignore the practical reality that their "combo" meal was 75% of what I ought to eat in a day, I know I was willfully blind to the obvious.

Are there medical reasons why women are overweight? Yes, absolutely. Get it checked out if you think that's the case. But if the doctor tells you otherwise, accept that maybe food and lack of activity are the real culprits. Truth: you know when people tell you lies they're disrespecting you. It's no different lying to yourself.

After that initial, rather easy, success ... the plateaus. Then ... the inevitable feelings that none of this was fair. I was exercising, dieting more than ever and nothing was changing. If whining burned calories I would be shaped like Audrey Hepburn. Well, like Audrey Hepburn when she was alive, not now—never mind, you know what I mean. But whining doesn't burn calories, and knowing something is unfair doesn't mean one day I'll wake up in a fair world. I have to work harder, and that sucks.

Each plateau required that I reevaluate my nutrition. I found ways to eat better nutrition for fewer calories. Clif Energy Bars became breakfast (and I had never eaten breakfast for most of my adult life) because they were filling, organic and packed with fitness-based nutrition and fiber. (Egads! Fiber, I'm worrying about fiber. What am I, nearly 50 or something? Oh yeah...I am.) I learned which foods I liked that gave me the most fun, flavor, nutrition and reward, and I learned how to mix them up so I didn't get bored. Still, I ate a lot of pretzel chips, reduced fat pepperoni, soup, yogurt and goat cheese.

I also picked apart the menus for every restaurant we frequented, and I stopped going to ones where it was a nutrition guessing game. There's really no excuse for any chain restaurant not to be able to give you a general idea of the nutritional breakdown of their menu items. Okay, I'll buy that they can't guarantee that every time they dish out beans they'll give me the same quantity, but the least they can do is tell me how many calories is in a half-cup of beans. I can take it from there. I registered my complaints whenever I could about the lack of information to make good decisions. Along the way I found advocates in the wait staff, who would quietly nudge me away from a dish once I indicated I was looking for lower fat alternatives, or would happily swap out a huge pile of fries with any kind of vegetable. In some chains, the "grilled" veggies are coated with oil; I found I was better off in calories and fat asking for steamed, plain veggies and putting honest-to-goodness butter on them myself.

Another important step was discovering the temptations that I could easily say no to, either because I simply didn't like whatever—*éclairs* for example—or because the calorie cost of whatever was higher than I was willing to pay. When my family wanted treats I could watch them enjoy without resentment. Desserts were held up to the Snickers bar test: why put a 500-calorie gooey something in my body when I'd be happier with a 210-calorie Snickers bar? If that dessert did in fact give me more pleasure than a Snickers bar (or more than a cup of my favorite fat-free ice cream with hot fudge for the same 210 calories), then I let myself enjoy every bite. No guilt.

By the time I made the last push to lose the last ten pounds, I was limiting myself to 1425 calories. Taking into account my projected exercise (which I always exceeded), the math said I should have lost a pound a week. It took nearly five months to lose those ten pounds. Essentially, a day's menu was a single meal of 600 calories and 3-4 snacks. Nutritionally sound but still appealing snacks were crucial, day in and day out. I had no room to waste on empty calories if I wanted to have the energy to exercise.

This was the brutal deprivation diet I had always avoided, but I only had to face it when my goal was literally within touching distance.

By the time it was what I had to do, I could do it.

I did not have to start there.

I developed bad habits gradually and learned good ones just as slowly. I gained weight gradually and took it off the same way.

I found the motivation, just long enough.

So over all those long years, I changed what I ate a little at a time. I didn't go the route of a sudden abrupt drop in calories, or eating all meat or all carbs or cabbage soup. I learned to squeeze every last calorie out of everything when it felt like a saltine cracker could be the difference between success and failure any given day.

I upped my exercise consistently, year after year. I had to keep changing the plan because what used to work didn't work any more. Sometimes I went back to what I'd tried and it would work that time. Because I had slowly reduced my calorie intake over time, I didn't struggle a lot with hunger and was never tempted to try any of the pills that were designed to control appetite. With a doctor's advice, some women might find them helpful.

In 2005, frustrated with another plateau, I acquired a tracking program for food and fitness. I discovered that even though I was better than most people at estimating my caloric intake, I was still undervaluing by about 10%. Every evening I use the program to plan my menu for the following day, juggling food for the best combination, building in treats every so often. I would like to stop, but I can't yet. It is too useful and still crucial to my success. It's actually kind of fun to look forward to pizza for several days; I appreciate the Joy of Pizza much more and realize that for much of my life I was eating without taking much pleasure in it. Now I really do appreciate delicious food.

## *Looking Back*

Lunch used to be a cheeseburger and fries, now it's Greek nonfat yogurt on a (tasty!) probiotic cereal.

From the time I was about 19, I dieted. I tried protein drinks, fad diets and even one or two good diets. In my 20s, I managed to live with the Pritikin extremely low-fat 1200-calorie-a-day diet for 4 months. My birthday was the only day I exceeded the limit and that was by 100 calories. I didn't exercise at all; I had no energy.

I lost exactly one pound. The day I went off the diet, I gained it back. Though I only increased my intake to about 1500 calories for the next month, I gained five pounds. After that, I didn't care. I felt bad, inside and out.

The problem wasn't my willpower with food, obviously, but that failure after trying so hard gave me more than a decade's worth of "why bother, nothing will work" eating habits that led to the 100 pounds I gained, at 10-15 pounds a year.

Dr. Katahn's (see the *Finder's Keepers Author's Research* document) explanation of why low calorie diets don't work was absolutely true for me. The less I ate on any diet, the less my body burned. I starved myself and my clever body learned to get me through my sedentary day while efficiently storing fat wherever it would fit because sooner or later I'd need that fat—except that I never did. It scares me that Dr. Katahn also explained that when starving the body burns muscle not fat; that explains why all very low-calorie diets left me shaking and weak by day two. The heart is a muscle, and I wonder what damage my many attempts caused.

For nearly fifteen years I trained my body relentlessly in how to store fat; it may be fifteen years before it is completely untrained. No diet will work without exercise. Lather. Rinse. Repeat.

Once I realized that I could actually lose weight, albeit slowly, that very simple activity and not very painful cutbacks in eating would work, I started making limited plans to speed things up a little. I expected failure. I didn't want anyone else to know I'd failed again, though, mostly because of the judgmental looks and wrong (and hurtful) assumptions people would make – she didn't try hard enough, she's fibbing about what she really ate, etc. – if I said I'd tried some diet plan and it hadn't worked. So I pretended it wasn't much effort but I was giving it my all. I didn't want to fail again, but if I did fail I would know it wasn't me that was at fault.

Think about the state of mind—and I know I'm not alone in having thought this way—that prevented me from asking a server to leave off the fries when I was 130 pounds overweight. It felt like admitting to the server I was fat. I projected that the server would think “it's about time” and I'd sense that. All too often, I'd also promise myself it was the last day I'd eat like that, but of course it wasn't. The Last Meal mentality kept me overeating for years.

I'd lost about 50 pounds before I made it clear to friends and family that I was actively trying to lose weight and get fit. Rude undertones from strangers I could shrug off by then; they hadn't lost 50 pounds, they had not one clue about what I had already achieved, they didn't know down to the last gram the nutritional content of what they had eaten for the last three months, and their ignorant judgment was about their ignorance, not about me, so yes, that hot fudge sundae is for me, no, I'm not sharing it, and I'm going to devour every bite since I saved up for two weeks to enjoy it, and when I'm done I'm going to lick the plate. Hmph.

Today I know that 90% of those “confrontations” with strangers about my body and my choices were in my head. But 10% were real; people really can be rude. So why was I letting rude people influence my choices in such a destructive way?

From the time I began keeping reliable records, ten years ago, my program was 2100 calories a day and those 3 hours of barely aerobic exercise a week. Ten years or so later, I finished those last ten

pounds at 1425 calories a day and 6 hours of blended aerobic/endurance exercise a week. My resting heart rate went from 83 to 58. My blood pressure dropped from 125/83 to 100/70. My fasting blood sugar dropped from 110 to 98 (Woohoo! That's a biggie!). Cholesterol was never a problem and still isn't. My body fat went from an estimated 42% to 23%. My BMI (for what that measurement is even worth) is 24. My clothing size fell from 28 to 12; I haven't worn a 12 or 14 since middle school.

I'm not obese, morbidly or otherwise. I'm not even overweight. I'm healthy, and I'm still getting used to it.

At the first visit to a new gynecologist, I found I had to explain who I used to be, because the doctor saw me as I was: a woman with a healthy BMI.

This journey was an adaptive process with false starts, frustration and futile efforts. Nothing was harder than to realize a new plan was having no success, and I'd lost not just the weeks involved, but the energy it took to stay motivated. Of everything, it was that energy that I feared would fail me. Giving up was never truly under consideration, but I would wake up daily thinking that would be the day my body completely betrayed me, and nothing I tried would work. Eventually, something always did, but the final ten pounds were bloody hard. I was afraid I would run out of steam before I got there.

Motivation got harder, not easier. Now that I have a healthy, fit body with a good ratio of fat to muscle, I am hoping it gets a little bit easier to maintain. So far, I have to keep learning, stay focused and keep track or I start to gain again (and yes, I had to learn the science behind why). There is one small glimmer of the positive from the years I was obese—underneath it all, I probably have very strong, thick bones. They could carry around 280 pounds 24/7. When menopause starts to sap their density, I will probably be at less risk of osteoporosis. However, being obese for 20 years is not recommended for prevention of osteoporosis!

The worst day of all was actually recent, one when I was very near my goal and I wouldn't have thought it would be easy for frustration and outright despair to overwhelm me. We had just returned from vacation and I had a cold that lingered. Though I forced myself to continue my exercise regimen, and relaxed my diet only slightly, I was exhausted all the time and gained 8 pounds in 7 weeks. I thought my thyroid had died overnight, but blood work showed nothing amiss, not even an infection. The Sunday after the blood work said there was "nothing wrong," I went to work out, ran, walked, skated and it was awful. A 23-minute route took nearly 30. I managed 5 miles of skating in the time that was normally 6 miles. There were no endorphins. I dragged myself back to the car and sat there and cried, too drained to put the key in the ignition. After all the work and energy, my body had finally given up. I felt no more "fit" than I had 120 pounds earlier. What had I done any of it for?

I felt no better Monday and promised myself the next day I'd call the doctor and agitate for another level of scrutiny over my symptoms. Tuesday morning when I woke up I knew instantly that I felt better. Not just better—after 7 weeks of feeling like the living dead, I was fine. I worked out later that day and all my times were normal, the endorphins were there, everything. Within a few more days, half the 8 mystery pounds sloughed off, but I still had to work to get those other 4 pounds off again. I don't know what was wrong, but it wasn't my choices.

I remain suspicious of my body, however, and that's something I just can't get over. I consider its metabolism to be the "enemy." Between aging, hormones and weird events with my immune system like this one, I know I will probably have more moments when I wonder what I did it all for. I hope I will remember then what I know now—I did it so that, when I am sick and exhausted or just old, I won't be heaving another 130 (or more) pounds out of a chair to try to get through the day.

[Additional note: 2011. My thyroid finally died, and did so without hitting any blood test numbers that confirmed it had died.

When my weight suddenly skyrocketed in 2009, and a month of living on 1200 calories a day and 3 hours exercise a week resulted in not losing weight, but rather not gaining any that month, I asked my doctor to check my thyroid again. Plainly, she thought I was making up my nutrition and exercise numbers. She suggested I eat my largest meal earlier in the day. Right. I quickly realized I knew more about weight loss than she did. Seriously.

On my own, I explored food allergies and discovered if I stopped eating gluten, my weight gain slowed dramatically. I had to give up my Clif Bars and many foods that had helped me lose weight to go gluten-free. Almost 18 months later, 12 more pounds gained (after gaining 25+ in just over a year), she still refused to consider that my thyroid was the problem, even though hypothyroid runs in my family. So I switched doctors. Even though the blood work didn't say I needed it, she put me on thyroid medication. A mere 4 days after starting the medication I felt astonishingly better. Miraculously better. After two months I am back to exercising some and finally feel as if I have a chance to relapse 40 pounds. It is very distressing that my original doctor didn't want to look past a blood test to try something when I was plainly depressed, losing my fitness and putting on pounds.]

A still difficult reality is not using the bathroom scale as the only measure of success. The other measures that I listed above (resting heart rate, fasting blood sugar, etc.) are more important. Sometimes, the bathroom scale refused to acknowledge weeks of extra exercise and careful adherence to the calorie limit. I tried to comfort myself with "muscles weigh more than fat" and of course being female, monthly water retention made the scale tip upward. When it felt like I'd hit a place where nothing worked (she whined), other measures were the only glimmer of hope. I'd get out my best fitting jeans to make sure they still fit. I'd try on a blouse that used to be a bit snug to find it looked even better. Even a mild reduction in shoe size was something to take as feedback. I began to take my measurements

every so often so I could calculate my body fat on my own (using Covert Bailey's formula), and see if muscle really was more compact than fat. (It is; I weighed the same but was smaller.)

Nevertheless, weight became the easiest daily measure of success, though weighing a given amount wasn't my final goal. My final goal was to feel good, look my best and be able to do the activities I really wanted to do for the rest of my life.

My perceptions of food and exercise have altered beyond anything I ever envisioned. Two dozen miniature chocolates used to be a treat—now I feel I'm living large with three Medjool dates and a dozen Marcona almonds. Lunch used to be a cheeseburger and fries, now it's Greek nonfat yogurt on a (tasty!) probiotic cereal. A walk I used to find exhausting is now not even part of my planned fitness, it's just "extra." Unexpected side benefit: my children also think dates and almonds are great snacks, and don't blink about going on hikes or other athletic endeavors. Because exercise and focus on healthy eating was part of their moms' lives, it's part of theirs.

Still, I love food. I adore rich, gooey desserts and wonderful stinky cheeses and goodness, put some salt on almost any kind of cracker and pass it this way. I literally can't eat such delights in the quantities I used to, but I still appreciate food as something other than a nutritional drug.

Exercise is something I will never like. But I appreciate its necessity now. I count on endorphins kicking in after about 35 minutes. I don't feel right, physically, if I miss two days in a row. I'm very lucky that I can, if I want, decide on the spur of the moment to take 40 minutes to walk to my daughter's school to pick her up (and she doesn't balk about walking home, either). I'm not chained to a desk. My partner works long hours and finds four hours during the work week plus more on the weekends. I have friends who are having their own successes, and they're doing it while working full-time as well – and my hat is completely off to them. I don't think I could have done it if I'd had only before and after work hours to invest in exercise. If you are finding the time, good for you because it's not

easy!

I am absurdly grateful to myself for not weighing 300 pounds, for not waiting any longer, for not eating more so that instead of 130 pounds, I had 150 pounds to lose. Since my average weight loss per year is 13 pounds or so, another 20 pounds would mean I'd still be struggling for another year and a half.

During these ten years, I had to figure out the difference between endurance, heart healthy and fat burning exercise — yes, they are all different. I had to treat food like drugs, taking some of this and a bit of that to support the machine of my body so I had enough energy to exercise so I could burn fat, build muscle, get more fit, need more food so I could eat... And so on. But every year I am fit and healthy past 60 is what I will get for the work I put in for these ten years. I figure, roughly, that over the ten years I invested 3,100 hours in exercise and nutrition planning and tracking, or 130 days. That's a little more than four months, 24/7. I know I will get those four months, 24/7, back. I am hoping for several decades, actually.

I didn't know when I was 37 that it would take me 10 years. I hoped for 5 years. I dreamed of 5 months because of those late night ads promised 60 pounds in 12 weeks or some such nonsense. It really doesn't matter that it took 10 years; I was going to be 47 anyway. Now I'm 47, and for the first time since I was 12, I'm a healthy weight and physically fit.

### *Last thing*

Ask for help and support. Talk to your doctor and if your doctor doesn't seem to have the facts try a new doctor. Read books, particularly those that do not want you to buy something else beyond the book. Go to the library and consider as much data as your brain can handle. They have fitness tapes and DVDs at the library too – try

before you buy.

Figure out how you learn and adapt, and find a program that works for you. What works for your best friend might not work for you. When you know something works for you, don't let the advice of others derail you. When something stops working, consider that a sign of progress and tweak, shift, change.

I'm an introvert, and I did most of the evaluation and planning on my own, though I discussed it frequently with my partner and a few friends. I like my iPod and exercise I've self-determined; it's quality alone time for me. I like reading and evaluating different approaches. I like trial and error. But that's just me.

Extroverts might really benefit from the social connection of a Weight Watchers type program and a group walking club.

Busy people, or those who hate to fuss about food might benefit from something like Jennie Craig.

Still others might want the easy but rigorous approach of a diet and exercise plan drawn up for them by a professional.

Give everything you try time to succeed or fail, convincingly. If it doesn't work, give it up but never without something new to try in its place. Give up the methodology but not the goal of a healthy you.

See the photos: [www.flickr.com/kallmaker/sets](http://www.flickr.com/kallmaker/sets)