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## Lifestyle change

Changing our lifestyle behaviors can be very challenging. It is uncomfortable to leave behind the old patterns that have fit so easily into our lives. An inactive lifestyle enables us to sustain workaholic tendencies or helps to support our “super parent” role. The process of letting go of these unhealthy life patterns requires us to demonstrate the qualities of courage and commitment.

### The Role of Courage and Commitment

In our culture, we usually define “courage” in terms of our capacity to accept a physical challenge or pain. We rarely equate this term with the willingness to accept the emotional, intellectual and sometimes physical discomfort of giving up a destructive life habit. But this willingness takes courage as well.

So we might define “courage” as the choice to do what we know to be right despite any difficulties or fears we may encounter.

To be controlled by these fears or difficulties is to be a victim of our need for safety, unable to change or find contentment. The question to consider is: Are you willing to experience a period of discomfort in

### tools for success

- Identify issues which may interfere with your ability to maintain your weight and develop strategies for managing these issues.
- Understand the impact your internal “self-talk” has on your weight management efforts.
- Differentiate between the language of guilt and shame and the language of choices and consequences.

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order to give up behaviors which do not support your desire to lead a healthy lifestyle?

Here are some examples of courage shown when a person is in the process of changing their lifestyle:

- Bob confronts his fear of leaving work on time and perhaps not completing a task in order to get to the gym for his workout.
- Louise confronts her fear of how she may be viewed by others when going to the pool in her bathing suit to exercise.
- Randy confronts his fear of conflict in order to stop someone who is pushing food on him at a time when he is attempting to reduce his calorie intake and to stay on track with his weight loss goal.

Most people accept responsibility for managing their lives. They work, pay their bills and maintain their family responsibilities. We remember times when we were fearful or afraid (i.e., changing jobs, starting college, moving to a new city, giving birth to a child, etc.). It is at these moments that we make the choice to push through our fears or discomfort for a greater goal.

As we anticipate the process of changing our

eating habits and activity level, it is crucial that we accept the responsibility for experimenting with new behaviors in spite of our anxiety or fears. These acts of courage increase our self respect and confidence in our ability to lose weight and maintain it. It is important to note that when we make a commitment to experiment with a new behavior and cannot follow through, it may have the opposite consequence, resulting in decreased self respect and confidence in our ability to lose weight and maintain it.

In general, we tend to downplay our efforts to experiment with new behaviors. When we begin to experiment with new behaviors, we may negate these attempts if they are not immediately successful. We may also minimize how courageous it is to try a new behavior! Our expectation is that we "should have been" exhibiting it long before this point in our lives. It is important to give ourselves credit when we follow through on a behavioral experiment, even if the result isn't what we expected! Remember: there is no such thing as "failure" and every new attempt at changing behavior teaches us something valuable.

Do you tend to criticize yourself for being fearful of making a change? What do you say to yourself?

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Do you tend to minimize the inner strength it takes to experiment with new behaviors? If so, list some examples of when you have done this.

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How did this tendency to minimize small victories affect your ability to sustain your focus and efforts in the area of weight loss and management?

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Here are examples of how successful weight managers have overcome their initial discomfort when making a change:

- Bob: "I went to the gym for my workout. My job is still mine and the work will get done. I am giving myself permission to leave work on time to help me live a healthier life."
- Louise: "I was scared to put on that bathing suit, but did it in spite of my fear. I had a good time swimming and feel good about the fact that I exercised. It's important I act in spite of my fear; otherwise, it stands in the way of my success."
- Randy: "It was smart of me to anticipate how hard Aunt Mary would try to make me have a piece of cake. I did a good job resisting. Her need to push sweets on her guests is about her own food issues and has nothing to do with my worth. I have committed to my food plan and I feel empowered when I stick with it."

### Courage Exercise

Take a few minutes to reflect on a current or past challenge where you acted in a courageous manner: What was the circumstance?

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What did you do?

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How did you feel during the behavior change?

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How did you feel after it was over?

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What did you learn from that situation?

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### Commitment

A single courageous act of experimentation with a new behavior is a great first step in changing behavior. Successful weight managers do this repeatedly to make these new behaviors become new habits. After the initial experimentation to incorporate a new behavior comes the commitment to practice these new behaviors. Commitment is not about what you should do, need to do, have to do or even want to do. It is about following through on what you say you will do.

Many of us confuse the word "commitment" with "goal." A goal is what you hope to achieve over time. A commitment is what you will do to achieve that goal. Following through on our commitments increases our self-respect and confidence. Unfortunately, not following through usually means just the opposite. Your participation in the OPTIFAST® Program provides not only education and support, but a place where you can define problem areas, identify positive new behavioral experiments and make commitments to practice these new patterns of conduct.



## The Role of Attitude

The problems associated with weight management do not always stem from our stress level, family, genetics or food choices, but from the way we perceive these factors. The following discussion will help you recognize and begin to change critical thinking patterns and replace them with a more constructive attitude.

It is important to note that although you may find it easy to recognize these negative thought patterns during group discussions and exercises, changing your “self-talk” can be tedious and frustrating. As with most other things in life, to succeed at weight management it takes patience and persistence.

You may not realize that our choices in life are the result of how we perceive the world and the emotions that result from those perceptions. Perceptions include our thoughts and the words we use to describe those thoughts.

Tom, an accountant, has been exercising three times a week for six months but has just run into a major roadblock. It is now tax season and the demands for hours on the job have significantly increased. Tom responds with the thought, “I just can’t handle so many work hours and keep up my exercise.”

What do you think his emotional response will be to this situation? It’s likely to lead to a sense of helplessness and of being overwhelmed, which then results in a choice to not exercise and the negative consequence of weight gain. This will reinforce his old belief that a life which includes exercise is too much to handle.

**Negative Attitude** I can’t stand (or tolerate, or cope, or handle)

**Negative Emotion** Helplessness, powerlessness

The words “I can’t” can make us believe that we are incapable of dealing with a situation in our lives. The phrase creates a belief that if we stay in this situation, we will “go crazy” as it is too uncomfortable to

**I can’t**

can make us believe that we are incapable of dealing with the situation.

tolerate. Used often enough, it tends to create a panicked, helpless sensation which in turn leads to feelings of powerlessness. This type of self talk confuses us in distinguishing the difference between running away from a situation and choosing to leave it.

At a social event, Susan tells herself that she can’t tolerate watching others eat many of the foods she enjoys. Susan feels that if she doesn’t eat something, she will go crazy. She sees herself as a victim in the sense that she is now powerless over her urge to eat when she is watching others. She feels helpless and knows no other alternative but to eat.

For most of us, if the motivation is great enough, we can tolerate any number of situations. We only need to look at the survivors of concentration camps and wars to realize we can tolerate much more than we think we can. Does this mean we must be perfect in riding out food urges? Of course not. But it does suggest that we can learn to challenge ourselves and do a little more than we think we can.

Actually, Susan was confusing *not standing* a situation with *not liking* a situation. Tolerating something doesn't mean we have to like it. We can even hate it. Reality dictates that we might be in a situation we don't like until we are able to change it, but we can stand and survive what we may intensely dislike.

**Attitude Exercise**

Describe a time when you told yourself that you could not tolerate a certain situation.  
What was your anxiety level like?

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How did you handle this situation?

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How might you handle it today?

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Describe a time when you tolerated a situation more effectively than you believed you were capable of. (Note: It does not need to be related to weight management.)

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How did you handle this situation?

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How did you feel about yourself as a result?

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## The Role of Values

As adults we have the ability to make choices based upon our own internalized set of rules. In most situations, these rules run parallel to what society values. None of us like to pay taxes, yet we value living in a country which is prosperous. Therefore, we accept that there is a price for the public services which make our lives comfortable and stable.

Many individuals who struggle with weight management experience a conflict in values. Problems arise because habits are often in direct opposition with those values which support a more active and healthier lifestyle. If weight managers should fail to reach their goals of either losing or maintaining weight, they often begin to use words and phrases in their internal language such as "I should," "I have to," "I need to." As those expectations fail, guilt and shame take over.

Linda wants to exercise three times per week in order to keep her weight down, but her work schedule is demanding and her efforts are directed toward achievement at work. She continually tells herself she should get to an aerobics class that meets at 5:30 p.m. This creates an internal conflict between what she wants and what actually occurs.

The values in conflict here are Linda's desire to see herself as a diligent worker who is achieving professional success versus her value to control her weight and live a healthy lifestyle through a consistent exercise program. For years, Linda has practiced living in accordance to her work-related values. She is in the habit of working over 50 hours each week. It's difficult for her to see any other way to live. The shame and guilt Linda carries as a result of being overweight and not living the healthier lifestyle she desires might be reduced or eliminated if she were to understand that she is embracing a choice and that she is placing her value on work achievement over health. For Linda, this means learning to live with the painful reality of being overweight.

When we have conflicts related to our values, it is often difficult to resolve these conflicts and the results are feelings of guilt and/or shame. These negative emotions are the consequence of childlike thinking. Linda sees no alternatives or options for resolving her "values" conflict. Instead, she imposes a set of "shoulds" to the tasks of weight management rather than recognizing that she has difficult choices to make in order to maintain a lower weight and a healthier lifestyle.

### Making Decisions

Making decisions is about looking at our choices and assessing the consequences of those choices. When choosing a behavior, we want to decide which consequences we are willing to accept, without blame or excuse. Behavior motivated by consequences is not the same as behavior motivated by "shoulds." The difference becomes obvious when we make mistakes. "Shoulds," as stated earlier, lead to guilt or shame; while mistaken choices lead to a focus on painful consequences without self-blame or excuses.

How could Linda more effectively problem-solve her conflict of values?

**Values Conflict:** Work hours leave no time to exercise.

	Choice	Consequence
1	Do nothing different at work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to lead an inactive lifestyle. Weight is controlled only by restrained eating.</li> </ul>
2	Cut back on overtime slowly and add exercise until she is working fewer hours per week.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linda might not be able to take on as many projects as she or her superiors might like.</li> <li>• Work might not get done as quickly as she or her superiors might like.</li> <li>• This could affect her ability to rise on the corporate ladder.</li> <li>• Linda begins to develop the identity of someone who lives a healthful lifestyle.</li> <li>• She will feel better physically and may actually be more productive in her work.</li> <li>• She may actually miss fewer days of work (physically active people have less absenteeism from illness than their sedentary colleagues).</li> </ul>
3	Choose not to change her work schedule but add three aerobic classes a week over a three month period.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lose time for other outside activities.</li> <li>• Improve physical conditioning while also realizing results will be slow.</li> <li>• Feel empowered in making changes about her activity level.</li> </ul>
4	Find an exercise option in the morning before work, later in the evening or at some other time during the day.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This may mean getting up earlier, staying up later, using part of her lunch hour or choosing multiple, shorter exercise periods throughout the day.</li> <li>• Doing multiple exercise periods of 10 minutes or more can be just as beneficial as one longer period of exercise.</li> <li>• Small amounts of exercise are better than no exercise.</li> </ul>

Linda can more effectively manage her life if she engages in problem-solving her challenges. When she makes a choice by reviewing each option and its consequences, she is more likely to accept decisions without self blame or excuses. She becomes free of guilt and shame for not being able to do what she believes she "needs to" or "should be" doing.

Courage and commitment come into play when we take on the discomfort of the consequences associated with our choices. It may mean changing the priority of our conflicting values or taking on additional obligations so that responsibilities radiating from both priorities are met. The challenges associated with these new skills can be difficult. But we can be successful if we are committed to examining our choices and then committing to trying new, healthier behaviors.