Dear Alice,

I want to lose weight so bad. My friend said he likes me the way I am, but I'm not comfortable with myself. I want to lose the weight, but I'm also kind of scared. I'm scared that I might lose the weight and lose control. I'm scared that I might become anorexic or bulimic. What do I do?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It's great that you're taking time to reflect on your needs, wants, and fears about your body and health. Before delving into strategies for moving forward, it might help to think about why you want to lose weight and what's making you uncomfortable with your body. Having a better understanding of yourself may reveal the root causes of these thoughts and provide some direction for addressing your concerns beyond your physical body. As you explore these thoughts, it's also good to remember that a healthy weight is different for each person—there are a number of factors that contribute to an individual's body type, weight, and build.

As a first step, you might reflect on how you feel about yourself. Pay careful attention to the nature of your thoughts: Are they self-encouraging or self-deprecating? Do you use positive or negative self-talk? Is your way of thinking about yourself flexible or limited? A way to practice this is to keep a daily journal to track the thoughts that are causing you to feel the way you do. It may also be helpful to think about if there are other factors that may be contributing to these feelings. For example, is it possible that school, work, relationships or family life could be playing a role in how you feel about yourself and your body? Identifying your thought patterns will allow you to explore them further by yourself, a family member, a friend, or with a mental health professional. These professionals can help you manage your thoughts and actions, not only related to your self-esteem, but also if you feel you're developing disordered eating patterns.

You may find it helpful to think about why you're scared of losing control and developing an eating disorder. Is this something you've had a problem with in the past? As you've noted, control can play a role in the development of eating disorders. Someone may experience a myriad of factors, such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, difficulty with personal relationships, expressing emotions, and glamorization of the media's portrayal of a thin ideal and body perfection. In order to feel a sense of control and cope with painful emotions, they may practice harmfully restrictive and obsessive behaviors with food, physical activity, and
medicine. Making a list of what you like about your body and yourself may help you stay focused on your health and guard against a possible movement towards unhealthy weight-loss goals. You may find it helpful to explore these ideas further with a professional who can help you process them.

Before deciding to make any changes, keep in mind that people can be healthy — both physically and mentally — in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. Adopting a balanced nutrition and physical activity plan that will keep you fit may be an effective strategy. That is, focus on improving your fitness and nutrition rather than excessive-calorie counting or other quick (and often ineffective and higher risk in the long-term) "fixes." That way you can judge your success by how you feel, not just on how you look.

Before you start an eating or fitness program, you might consult with your health care provider. Talking with them about your concerns may highlight some preventive strategies or additional resources. If you're a college student, many universities house a registered dietitian on staff who can help you achieve a healthy pattern of eating without developing an eating disorder. With the guidance of these professionals, making any changes in a healthy and safe way may increase the likelihood of seeing results both physically and emotionally and minimize any harm.

All the best finding the support and confidence you deserve!

Alice!

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Related questions

Eating disorders vs. non-disordered eating [7]
Am I bulimic, or is it just a phase? [8]
Is it better to be fit and fat, or unfit and thin? [9]

Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [10]
Columbia Health Nutrition Services (Morningside) [11]
Medical Services (Morningside) [12]
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