

Measuring Success in More Ways Than One by Steve Baldwin, MS, RD, Poppy Seeds Associate Editor

Just about everyone who has tried to lose weight has experienced it.

You drank plenty of water and ate lots of fruits and vegetables. You exercised at least 30 minutes daily, and ran around with the kids at the park twice for good measure. You limited fast foods, skipped the sodas, and even had a handful of grapes instead of a cupcake at a co-workers birthday celebration. Then, stepping on the scale at the end of a week filled with healthy habits, you discovered that you weigh a half-pound more than you did the week before.

“I’ve never felt so discouraged my whole life,” my colleague Karen (I’ve changed her name) recently told me. Another co-worker said it perfectly. “My scale is lucky to be alive. I wanted to throw it [into the street] and run over it with my car.” Have you heard of road rage? How about scale rage?

On the surface, using a scale to measure weight loss makes sense. But the reality is that most of us who want to lose *weight* really want to lose *fat*. After all, nobody says, “I’d really like to lose some of this muscle,” or “Gosh, I wish my bones weren’t as thick so I could weigh less.” But our friend (or perhaps nemesis?) the scale can’t differentiate between fat, lean tissue (like muscle and bone), or water. The scale just gives you one number, and sometimes that number doesn’t represent the healthful choices you’ve made or the positive habits you’ve practiced.

Your body could be holding on to some extra water that week. Or since you’ve been exercising you may have added a bit of muscle – which does weigh more than fat. It could even be as simple as wearing heavier clothes or shoes. Any of these could be interpreted as “weight gain” on the scale.

“I had done everything right, and then the scale said [I hadn’t]...it made me feel like a failure,” Karen told me. Karen my friend, read this paragraph carefully, and then read it again: you are not a failure, not by any stretch of the imagination. You are, in fact, 100% certified fantastic. You’re on the path to success, and there may be a more effective tool you can use to measure your progress.

If you’re trying to lose weight and want to stay motivated while avoiding scale rage, one of these measures – or a combination of several – may work for you.

Think health instead of weight. When you feel good about yourself and feel healthy, the number on the scale doesn’t really matter. It’s just a number. Focus on eating nutritious foods and being physically active, forget about numbers for a while, and let your weight take care of itself. Let how you feel, your energy level, and your relationships with others determine your success.

Keep an exercise log. Some people write down the food they eat as a way to keep themselves on track. You can do the same with exercise. Write down the activity you do each day for a month. Aim for doing something every day for 30 minutes, but if that seems like a lot, do what you can

to start and add a little each day. At the end of the month you'll be able to look back at your progress and feel great about it.

Inch your way along. Keep track of the inches you lose instead of pounds. At the start, use a fabric (flexible) measuring tape and record the circumference of your upper arm, waist, hips, upper leg, and calf. Then every month, check the measurements again and record the results. If you want to avoid numbers, measure each body part with a string, cutting the length so that just fits around the body part you're measuring. Then, as you lose inches, see how much "overlap" string you have on each body part. Be sure to measure the same spot on your body for accuracy, and only measure once a month. Also keep in mind that you can't spot reduce (lose fat in just one area), so taking several measurements in different areas is the way to go.

Consider how your clothes (and you) fit. Being able to comfortably wear a pair of jeans that used to be too tight is a great motivator. But also pay attention to how you fit into your surroundings. Are movie theater seats more comfortable? How about your chair at work or an armchair at home? Can you walk up stairs more easily than before? All of these are clues that the positive changes you've made are paying off.

I will admit that for the right personality, weekly or monthly weigh-ins can keep the motivation going. If you're able to use the scale in a positive way, that's great. For the rest of us, freedom from the scale feels like we've been granted parole. Just remember that the number on a scale can't define you. It won't hurt you, and it can't control you. It's not who you are, and it's not always a good measure of success.

It is, after all, just a number.

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