

WALKING THE DISTANCE



BY JODI DAVIS

WALKING THE DISTANCE



I started walking and lost 162 pounds. Read my story.

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Welcome.

Did you know that four of every ten people in the state of Michigan are obese?

Until five years ago, I was one of them.

I'm a stay-at-home mom with three kids, so I can really relate to women who have little ones at home and are trying to lose weight. Been there, done that!

By my early 30s, I was well on my way to topping 300 pounds. Then a family tragedy forced me to deal with my unhealthy weight, once and for all.

It took 16 months, but I lost 162 pounds. And I did it the old-fashioned way, through a combination of healthier eating and walking. No gimmicky diets, no expensive equipment, no herbal supplements, no drastic surgery.

My kids are teenagers now, but when I got serious about losing weight, they were much younger. Like most moms, I put the welfare of everyone else in the family first. That meant hours of driving the kids to soccer practice and after-school activities, countless more hours of volunteering and very little "me time." Fast food was the norm in our house for lunch, and dinners often included fattening pasta and potato dishes.

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I loved my family and our life, but when I looked in the mirror, I didn't like me.

Now I understand that when I take care of myself, my family is happier.

I can't possibly thank my kids enough for their love and support, especially during the 16 months I was working so hard to reach my goal. My children — Kirstin, Devin and Rachael — have been my biggest cheerleaders. I'm also grateful for my parents, Marc and Lynne, for loving me just the way I was as a child and for being so proud of me now.

Finally, I want to dedicate this story to the memory of my devoted walking partner, Sierra, a lovable little Siberian husky and terrier mix who died not long ago. She was with me every step of the way. Without her boundless enthusiasm for a good long walk, no matter how cold it was, I would not be sharing my success with you.



Fat girl, small town.

I have lived in the same small town in western Michigan my entire life.

The great thing about small towns is that everybody knows everybody. The down side of living in a small town is that when you're overweight, as I was, there's nowhere to hide. You are stuck being the heavy girl.

Despite my extra weight, I had a happy girlhood. My mother was usually the room mother at my school, and she went out of her way to make every day special. She kept a spotless home and put a wonderful dinner on the table every night. My dad was a hard-working, handsome man loyal to the same local company for many years, more than 40 as of this writing!

We lived near a lake, and boating, swimming and fishing were a big part of my life — and still are! My younger sister and I had lots of pets, including a chicken named Farah, a pig named Brutus, lots of bunnies, and three generations of cockapoos — Muffin, Crescent and Biscuit.

By fifth grade, I was definitely on the chubby side. My grandfather made it worse. He would tease me by singing a popular polka song with the words, "I don't want her, you can have her, she's too fat for me." His teasing only drove me to accept his words as true.

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Today, country music is big in my house. When I look back at my childhood, the women in our family remind me of the Judds. My 103-pound mom, who was sometimes mistaken for Elizabeth Taylor, was beautiful and thin like Naomi Judd. My younger sister, Tricia, was “normal” size and attractive, like Ashley Judd, the actress. And then there was me, the big one, like Wynonna.

My parents always told me I was beautiful the way I was. Mom tried to help me lose weight — for a while, she served grapefruit juice before every meal. I secretly believed I was a big disappointment to them, even though they never said or did anything to make me feel that way.

My Aunt Ruth, bless her heart, sent me letters telling me she knew how I felt since she was the fat one in her family. But her letters scared the heck out of me, because she never married or had children. I thought the same thing was going to happen to me.

If you’d known me back then, I probably would have been your friend. I was always extra nice to everyone to make up for my flaws. I was a baton twirler, a cheerleader (the heaviest one) and a gymnast.

Other girls looked forward to the annual back-to-school shopping trip, but I dreaded it. One year, I wore a favorite navy-blue hooded sweatshirt to school each day as a cover-up to hide the extra pounds.

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I was so desperate to lose weight that I even tried going without food for three days. Today, that type of behavior is considered a sign of an eating disorder. I tell my two daughters to learn from my mistake.

Skipping meals and fasting are not good ways to lose weight. Your body goes into “starvation mode,” and when you begin eating normally again, you gain all the weight back — and in my case, more.

I always figured I deserved the “good” stuff — the chips and the French fries and the fatty foods — because I’d gone without it. I thought dieting meant giving up anything that tasted good.

Maybe I was just meant to be fat. Maybe I deserved to be fat. For so many years, that’s what I thought.



Bigger than the other mommies.

My husband and I got married after I graduated high school. Like many brides-to-be, I went on a diet to fit into my wedding dress. I lost 50 pounds, but I gained 15 pounds back during our 10-day honeymoon from eating at fast food restaurants three times a day!

Most of the overweight mothers I've known are still trying to lose the weight they gained when they were pregnant. But I was different. I always lost the 30 pounds I gained with each baby right away. Then I would start packing on the pounds again. I can't tell you how many pounds because I refused to get on a scale. My jean size continuously grew so I knew I was gaining weight. Sweatpants became my best friend.

When our children started school, they learned that I was bigger than all the other mommies, and their feelings got hurt when their friends made fun of me. I was embarrassed for them, and for myself.

I would try to use these painful occasions to teach my kids about the importance of appreciating people's differences. When people make fun of others, it's usually because they have low self-esteem themselves, I told them.



Another painful memory that has stayed with me is being a bridesmaid for a family wedding and having to shell out an extra \$40 to cover the additional fabric required for my size 26 dress. Even more hurtful, other relatives went out of their way to exclude me from their wedding parties. It was clear they didn't want me ruining the wedding pictures!

Just as I did when I was younger, I compensated for my weight by throwing myself into activities. I was the chairperson for almost all of my children's events at the elementary school for 10 years and was a mentor for students who needed extra help. I chaperoned school trips. I was an athletic booster. I made costumes and designed the sets for the talent shows.

When somebody wanted me to volunteer, I found it difficult to say no. I often had the same problem when it came to eating my favorite foods. It was difficult to refuse them.

I tried low-fat, low-carb — you name it, I tried it — and nothing worked. I always ended up feeling starved and deprived, and then eating more to make up for it.

I tried to look on the bright side. My husband loved me. My kids loved me. My house was beautiful. I had many friends and a wonderful life.

I decided being big was okay. Big was who I was.



My moment of truth.

If there's one thing that most overweight people have in common, it's denial. I would never admit to being obese, even when my doctor would try to talk to me about my weight.

“You're quite pudgy,” I remember her saying when I was pregnant with one of the kids. I thought to myself, “Yes, I am a little pudgy, but that's OK. At least I'm not obese.” But in reality, I was.

I knew that people who are obese are often unhealthy. But I was different. I stayed active, mowing our big yard with a push mower, gardening and paddling our boat on a nearby lake. I had great blood pressure — okay, maybe a few very slight heart palpitations here and there.

The truth is, I gave up on my goal to be slender because I believed it simply wasn't possible for me to lose more than 100 pounds. I convinced myself that I was meant to be fat and would just have to accept it and move on.

For most of my life, I achieved all of the other goals I set for myself — being a good student, cheerleader, wife and mom — because I believed in myself. Why was losing weight so different?

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I spent more than 20 years telling myself that I would never be slim — and believing a few unsupportive relatives who also didn't believe in me.

And then my husband's cousin, Shirley, died of weight-related problems.

Shirley was a few years older than me, and she had a son a few years older than my eldest. When I went to the funeral and saw her son standing by her casket, without a mom, I thought, "That could be my kids!"

It was too late for Shirley, but it wasn't too late for me. I felt her death was God's way of getting my attention.

When I shared my newfound determination to change my life with my good friend, Mel, she reassured me. "You can do it, Jodi. It's time."

I knew Mel was right. But I would have to do it my way.



Cake on a diet?

I started my diet on Jan. 22, 2001. By the time I reached my goal weight, on May 23, 2002, I had lost 162 pounds.

That's four pounds more than the 158 pounds our son, Devin, used to wrestle at. I lost the equivalent of a growing teenage boy!

But unlike my previously unsuccessful attempts, this time I did not broadcast my weight loss goals to the world. For the first five months, I confided in just two other people – my girlfriend, Mel, and my daughter, Kirstin. I needed Kirstin to take my “before” photos, front and back.

Have you noticed that when you tell some people you're on a diet, they start to scrutinize everything you eat? That's the last thing I needed. If I wanted a small piece of birthday cake, I didn't want people commenting on how I shouldn't eat that, or whispering to each other that they “thought Jodi was supposed to be dieting.”

To stay under the diet police radar for as long as possible, I avoided calling my new way of eating a diet. Instead, if I didn't want to eat something, I would say, “I can't eat that stuff now” or, “That has too many calories and isn't healthy.”



I will be the first to tell you that my eating plan may not have the same results for you. And I'd encourage you to check with your doctor before you get started on any diet and exercise plan.

Here's what worked for me:

- I cut my daily calorie intake to about 1,200 calories, which would allow me to lose up to two pounds a week.
- I cut portion sizes and refused second helpings.
- I substituted ground turkey for ground beef, and when I did use ground beef, I made one pound feed our family of five.
- I substituted low-fat pretzels and crackers for chips.
- I kept soy nuts, low-calorie granola bars and other healthy snacks in the car for long trips. Low-fat pretzels were always readily available when I opened the cupboard at home.

For a late-evening snack of popcorn (my favorite snack), I substituted a "light" microwave popcorn with only 110 calories for the entire bag.

I still enjoyed cake and ice cream for a special celebration, but only a few bites.

When I ate fast food, I often didn't eat the bun.

I tried to eat a banana every day, and I always have fruit and yogurt in the house.



We drink skim milk in our house, not whole milk or even 2 percent.

I've never been big on soft drinks. (And have you ever noticed how so many people at fast food restaurants super-size their meals but order a diet soft drink?)

I drink a lot of water and green tea. I do like my coffee, but with sugar substitute.

Breakfast is now low-fat peanut butter on wheat toast with sugar-free blueberry or raspberry preserves.

Lunch was often a frozen diet meal while I was losing weight. Now it's something light and simple, such as soup, fresh veggies and fruit.

Dinner might be broiled chicken (without the skin), bean soup, or a chicken stir-fry with loads of vegetables — from our garden, during the season.

We've really cut down on mayonnaise, ranch dressing and butter in favor of low-fat and zero-calorie condiments.

“Moderation in all things” is my motto.

That way, I can have my cake and eat it, too!



Walking works!

It's a good thing "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head" was one of my favorite songs as a small child. I would remember that song during my walks in the rain and smile while under that umbrella! I made each walk a positive experience, no matter what the weather was!

I started a regular walking program about five months into my diet, hoping to kick up my weight loss a notch or two. It worked.

Why walking? We live near a beautiful lake, and I loved the quiet time with my dog Sierra, who also needed the exercise. I could walk whenever it fit into my schedule for that particular day. I didn't have to purchase special equipment or join a gym. And it was free, which is especially important to a family living on one income.

The first thing I did was make a date with myself. I put "walking" on the calendar every day for 21 days and treated it like something you'd make time for every day, like taking a shower or brushing your teeth. I set a goal of 21 straight days of walking because experts say it takes about 21 days to form a habit.

Next, I charted a 1½-mile walking course by driving my car ¾-mile from our house and marking that point. I knew if I walked to that point and back, I would get my mileage in.



The first few weeks were the toughest. I felt like I was beginning a very long journey, but I was determined that it would be an enjoyable one.

The first few days I got little pains in my side, but they went away quickly. For a while, Sierra would dawdle behind me, but as time went by, she was walking in front of me and leading the way. She was over 15 when she died, and the vet told me she was in wonderful shape for her age!

To keep up a brisk pace, I pretended that my house was on fire, and that my family would not get out unless I got home. I know it may sound extreme, but it really got me moving!

Because I usually walked after dinner, when my husband was home, I could take a child with me or simply leave all three of the kids behind to spend time with dad. But if you're a mom who simply doesn't have that option, you can bring the kids along.

Walking is a great way to spend quality time with your children. It's a perfect time to talk about their day and get some much-needed fresh air. Young children usually enjoy a stroller or wagon ride, giving mom's arms an extra workout. Older children may enjoy riding a bike or roller skating alongside mom as she walks.

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I never allowed myself to make an excuse for not walking. When I just couldn't get out, I might run in place with the kids while watching TV. Sometimes we would sing along with the radio and dance. It was fun, free and we created some great memories.

I started feeling the benefits of my new exercise routine almost immediately. I was burning about 150 calories on each walk. And I was also happy to learn that if you walk just 30 minutes five times a week, you lower your risk for heart attacks, strokes, breast cancer and diabetes.

A few months into my walking routine, people were really starting to notice my weight loss. At first, they thought I had changed my hair or makeup. Some folks told me later they did notice but were afraid to say anything.

I'll admit I actually tried to change the subject the first time one of my girlfriends paid me a compliment over lunch. I was afraid she was secretly thinking I would never keep it up.



It's only a number.

I have a secret that has helped me stay slender for five years now:

I don't own a scale.

Now, maybe this idea won't work for you, but I refuse to get obsessed about numbers. Don't ask me what I weigh because I honestly don't know.

I don't need a scale to tell me when I gain a pound or two during the holidays. My tighter jeans send the message loud and clear.

I look at it this way: When I'm in my car headed to a destination, I don't need to check the odometer every few minutes. I know where I'm going.

And I'm certainly not going to let a couple of extra pounds sabotage my success, the way they did when I was a teenager.

I've heard from many people in my community who say they were inspired by my success to make positive changes in their own lives. Everyone wants to know how I did it.



Here are some of the tried-and-true ideas that helped me reach a healthy weight and keep up a regular exercise program:

- Believe in yourself.
- Resolve to start simply by making one or two changes in your diet. Give each change about 21 days to kick in, because that's the amount of time it takes to develop a habit.
- If it's not on your diet, don't buy it.
- Don't make any excuses. Always have a backup plan if you can't get outside for your walk.
- Use visualization to reach your goal. I bought a beautiful black swimsuit and imagined myself wearing it one day.

If it makes you feel better, buy yourself some nice athletic wear. When I wore my spandex pants and matching top, I was not only more comfortable, I felt more like an athlete.

Walk with a buddy. My main walking partner these days is Izzie, a "Heinz 57 Variety" dog who literally jumps for joy when I pick up her leash.



When it comes to food, know the enemy and have a plan for victory. I love chips and fries, but I find low-fat popcorn and pretzels satisfy my cravings.

If you really must eat that cake, remember the first bite tastes the same as the 20th. Have a bite or two, then leave the table.

Be your own best friend. If you're tempted to make an excuse for why you must eat that big bag of French fries, ask yourself: Am I giving myself permission to fail?



If I can do it, you can do it.

At this point, you might be asking, “Jodi, what makes you such an authority?”

I’m not a doctor, and I encourage you to check with your family doctor before you start a diet or exercise program.

I do know a lot about getting motivated and staying motivated.

If you’re struggling to adopt a healthier lifestyle, think about this: Isn’t it funny how so many people play the lottery and think they have a good chance of striking the jackpot when the actual odds of winning are more like 1 in 7 million?

So why is it these same people, when it comes to achieving their desired weight, tell themselves it’s impossible when, in fact, their odds of successfully losing those stubborn pounds are much better than winning the lottery?

Many of us set ourselves up for failure before we get started. We tell ourselves it’s too difficult to lose weight. We’ve never succeeded before, so why should this time be different?



We wait for all the stars to be aligned. But instead of saying, “Someday, I’ll lose that weight and get healthy,” we should say, “Today is that someday.”

I used to dread my high school reunions and those depressing trips to the plus-size shop to get a dress. But for my 20th high school reunion in 2004, I looked forward to wearing a green Spandex and cotton sun dress from none other than Victoria’s Secret.

For once, I was not the largest person in the room. At the signup table, one of the “thin” girls from my high school days asked me for diet advice.

Later that night, a friend from the Parent-Teachers Organization pulled me aside and said everyone was talking about me. My heart sank, and I tried to hold back the tears, remembering all those times from high school when I felt like everyone was laughing at me.

But tonight was different. My friend told me that everyone was talking about how great I looked. She wanted me to know that I was the “talk of the town.” I will never forget that.

And that’s only the beginning of how my life has changed.

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Today, I can walk up flights of stairs or climb the dunes at the beach and not be out of breath.

I can smile for the picture instead of trying to hide behind someone.

I can cross my legs and sit like a lady.

I can look at myself in a full-length mirror.

I no longer worry about my kids being teased because their mom is bigger than the other moms.

I feel healthier, and I don't have nightmares about dying in my sleep because my heart can't handle the excess stress.

And when I blow out the candles on my birthday cake or see that first star at night, I can finally wish for something other than being thin!



Talk to me.

Hard to believe, but it's been five years since I reached my goal weight. After all those years of trying and failing, I've found a healthy lifestyle that works for me.

Now I'm on a mission to inspire others to take charge of their health.

With the support of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, I've started a blog about walking and weight loss at walkytalk.com. I see the blog as an online community where we can support each other on the road to good health.

I look forward to hearing from you! And remember — walking works!