

Lose Weight Your Way

New research shows there's no such thing as a one-size-fits-all approach to weight loss. The secret to success: finding what works for you. That's what these women did—and now they're lighter, leaner, and a whole lot happier.

BY EVELYN SPENCE

Lost **130** pounds!

"I finally realized I'm truly worth it."

Veronica Montoya

AGE: 44 HOMETOWN: Anaheim, CA
HEAVIEST WEIGHT: 265 CURRENT WEIGHT: 135

▶ "PEOPLE DON'T REALLY look at you when you're obese," says Veronica Montoya, who, over the course of 3 years, has lost half her body weight. "I nearly dropped my coffee on the floor the first time someone actually looked me in the eye."



When Montoya healed her heart, the weight began to fall away. "This time, I tackled what was happening on the inside," she says.

JOSE MANDOUJAY

Montoya started feeling invisible at age 9, when her father quit his job as a correctional officer to open a small bakery, where Montoya worked after school and on weekends. Living on Mexican pastries from her family's store, pizza from a shop next door, and candy from a nearby 7-Eleven, she quickly became chubby.

Even worse, Montoya's father was verbally and physically abusive. "I never seemed to get anything right," she says. "I started to believe that I deserved to be treated that way." Ashamed, she began a long pattern of sneaking food—a pastry hidden in her towel, a cookie tucked in the pocket of her apron, a roll with butter behind her work station. By the time she started high school, she weighed 220 pounds and her confidence was nonexistent.

Over the next few decades, her struggles with weight and self-esteem continued. "I would cycle between extreme dieting and bingeing," she recalls. When a destructive relationship with a longtime boyfriend ended in 2014, Montoya hit her nadir—hard. She buried herself in her work and ate her way through 16-hour days. "The

worse I felt about him, the worse I treated my body," she says. "I started thinking that perhaps I really wasn't worth loving—and not worth anything at all." Soon she weighed 250 pounds and had to take time off from work to avoid a mental breakdown.

Her turning point came when a therapist advised her to start keeping a journal and get moving. Even though it took all the mental strength she had to tie her shoelaces, Montoya started going for short walks, first logging just

5 minutes, then 10. "The feeling of walking outdoors was so hopeful that the embarrassment and resentment I felt about the relationship disappeared," she says. "I still had legs that move, a heart that beats. Every day seemed beautiful and full of possibility."

Around the same time, she started watching the TV show *Extreme Weight Loss* with trainer Chris Powell, who emphasized a key point: You are enough. "I started to realize that the physical part of losing weight is relatively easy, but the inner work is tough," she says. "This time, I decided I was finally going to deal with the real root of the problem: my lack of self-worth."

Over the next several months, Montoya surrounded herself with positivity through books and online TED talks. At the same time, she underwent a massive lifestyle change that put her personal care front and center. She cut back on her work hours to give herself more time to exercise and began tracking her daily steps and food intake. Within a year, she had lost more than 60 pounds and given her confidence a huge boost.

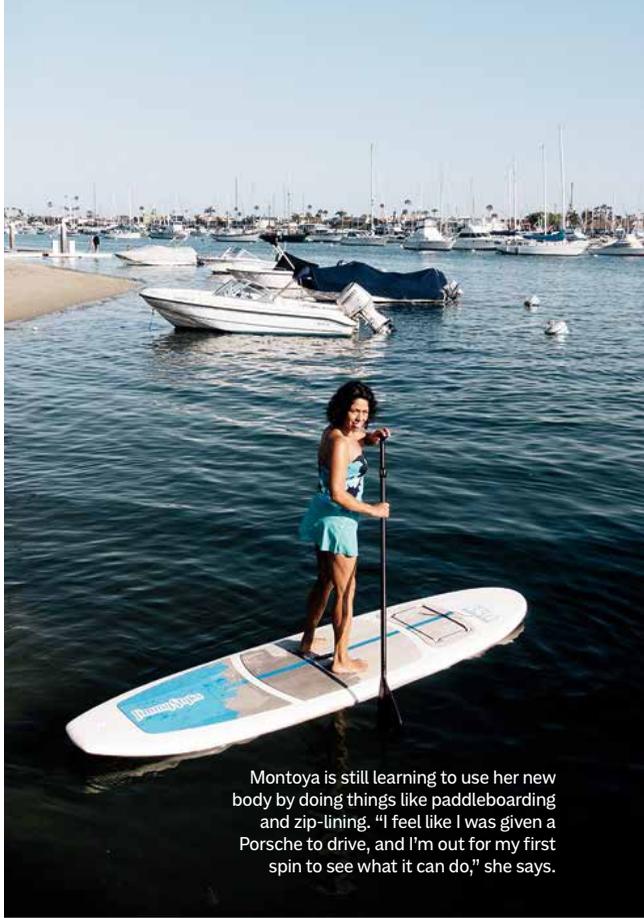
That's when she had another aha moment. "I looked at myself in the mirror, and it looked like I was wasting away," she says. "I wanted to be stronger and knew I needed more help." Working with a trainer who had lost more than 180 pounds himself, she reduced her cardio days, added strength days, and redoubled her efforts to eat clean, home-cooked foods. Knowing that her trainer understood her struggles

motivated Montoya to follow his advice. In another year, 60 more pounds disappeared—and with it, severe IBS and high cholesterol.

Even though she's thrilled to land at 135, Montoya knows the real win is not what she sees in the mirror but how she feels inside. "It took a long time to get here, but it was worth it," she says. "Everything changed when I started believing that I matter."

Veronica's Weight Loss Secrets

- **Find your inspiration.** Whether they're from a book, podcast, TED talk, or sticky note on your computer screen, return to the words that resonate.
- **Photograph your meals.** This not only helps Montoya keep track of what she eats but also reminds her of how amazing her healthy dinners look. "If I'm feeling bummed about missing birthday cake, I just scroll through my photos," says Montoya. "I think, *Nope, don't need it. Look at what I made. The food I eat is awesome.*"
- **Keep a reasonable pace.** Many overweight people think they need to exhaust themselves at the gym. But Montoya realized that going hard and hating it was counterproductive because it could cause her to stay on the couch for the next week. "Start slowly and build from there," she says.



Montoya is still learning to use her new body by doing things like paddleboarding and zip-lining. "I feel like I was given a Porsche to drive, and I'm out for my first spin to see what it can do," she says.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSÉ MANDOJANA; HAIR AND MAKEUP BY ASHLEY HUMPHREYS

Lost **60** pounds!

“I fell in love with cycling.”

Susan Brenner

AGE: 50 HOMETOWN: Bronx, NY

HEAVIEST WEIGHT: 200 CURRENT WEIGHT: 140

► FIVE YEARS AGO, Susan Brenner was overworked and out of shape. Exhausted from managing a busy men's store on Madison Avenue in New York City, she got no exercise beyond the short walk from her apartment to the subway. On the way home, she'd regularly grab a few slices of pizza; in front of the TV at home, she'd munch on snacks. “I was a junk food vegetarian,” she says. “I ate fries and chips in huge portions.”

When she brushed up against the 200-pound mark, someone jokingly called her Big Susan. The comment stung but also served as a harsh reality check. “I couldn't escape the fact that I was getting heavier,” she says. “Nothing fit, and I wasn't feeling well—it was like I was deteriorating from the inside out.” Brenner was ready to make a change, but the prospect was daunting. She'd wasted money on unused gym memberships in the past—slogging through an intense boot camp class was not her idea of fun—and knew she needed to

find an activity she actually enjoyed.

Her answer came a few weeks later, when Hurricane Sandy hit the East Coast, causing subway stations to flood and trains to stop running for a week.

In need of a way to get to work, Brenner remembered that she had a bicycle in storage. Though she hadn't ridden it in years, she decided to bike the 4.5 miles from her apartment to her office to open the store. “I was shocked by how much I enjoyed it,” she recalls. “I was tired, but the fresh air was liberating. When I was riding, I felt like a kid again.”

Inspired, Brenner started commuting by bike regularly: “It was an amazing stress reliever, and I got to see the city in a whole new way.” On her days off, she rode longer distances. It was exercise, but it didn't feel like an obligation. “It was fun instead of a punishment,” she says.

After a few months, her clothes were looser and she felt herself getting stronger—and more adventurous. She joined a local bike club, started training for charity rides, and began volunteering to teach kids how to ride. “The more I rode, the better I felt,” she says. “And I wanted to pass on that amazing feeling.”

Weight loss success and failure are almost as individual and unpredictable as we are:

Research shows that the same diet can help one person lose 40 pounds and cause another to gain 10.

“I look back at photos of myself and think, *Wow—I've come so far,*” says Brenner, who now spends her free time on two wheels.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CALLIE LIPKIN; HAIR AND MAKEUP BY AMANDA MARKOVA

Motivated to get into even better shape for longer rides, Brenner next took a hard look at her diet. “I wanted to do it right, and that meant choosing clean, unprocessed foods,” she says. After skipping breakfast for years, she started eating granola with almond milk to power her mornings, snacking on nuts and fruit instead of chips, and taking shots of pickle juice rather than chugging sports drinks. Within a year of changing her eating habits, Brenner had shed 60 pounds. Since then, she’s kept up the biking and kept off the weight.

“Cycling is my joy, my freedom, and my medication,” she says. “It’s my everything.”

Susan’s Weight Loss Secrets

- ▶ **Turn a workout into a reward.** Whether it’s riding a bike or something else, find a fitness activity you truly love. “When you look forward to it, excuses will lose all their power and meaning,” says Brenner.
- ▶ **Challenge yourself.** Once you find an activity you enjoy, look for ways to grow your interests and skills. It will keep you engaged and less likely to slack off, she says.
- ▶ **Plan your fuel.** Brenner often makes enough whole grains (such as brown rice and quinoa) to last a few meals, adding her prep to salads, tacos, and stuffed peppers. “It’s so much easier when you have quick staples on hand,” she says.

Lost 60 pounds!

“I made a truce with food.”

Laura Jacobs

AGE: 66 HOMETOWN: Philadelphia
HEAVIEST WEIGHT: 250 CURRENT WEIGHT: 190

▶ AS FAR BACK as she can remember, Laura Jacobs’s sole confidants and inner tormentors were sugary, high-calorie snacks and sweets. When she was 6 years old, she soothed her boredom by sneaking Frosted Flakes from the kitchen and finishing the entire box in one sitting. In her teens, she would binge on ice cream, feel guilty, and drop the half-empty container in the trash—and then argue with herself about whether to fish it out. “I felt lonely, so I would gorge on sugary foods, and then I’d be ashamed,” she says. “And the cycle would continue.”

Her isolation was understandable: When Jacobs was an infant, her father had a severe stroke, leaving her mother to be both caregiver and breadwinner. “Attention, connection, and guidance were rare,” Jacobs says. “Food became my friend, and throughout my childhood, my body showed it.”

The next several decades were a diet roller coaster: She tried Weight Watchers,

PHOTOGRAPH BY CALLIE LIPKIN; HAIR AND MAKEUP BY ELLE PALACHICK



“I used to give everything until I was empty and use food to fill myself up again,” says Jacobs. Now she finds other ways—like walking with her dog, CJ—to stay happy.

PERSONAL HEALTH

Jenny Craig, and NutriSystem. Each worked for a short while, but then her emotions would roar, she'd give in to cravings, and the scale would spike.

When Jacobs reached age 56, her executive search business was booming, but her health was deteriorating: At 5'10", she weighed 250 pounds, had high cholesterol and blood sugar, and felt as ashamed about her relationship with food as she had as a child. "I knew that if I kept up the emotional eating, I was going to die young," she says.

Laura's Weight Loss Secrets

- **Make it special.** "I treat myself like a queen when I eat, which reminds me to slow down and enjoy each bite. I light a candle, drink sparkling water out of a crystal goblet, and often use my best china," Jacobs says.
- **Look beyond food for pleasure.** "Every day, I try to do at least one thing that will make me happy," says Jacobs. When she fills her time with activities she loves—planning trips, dancing, taking photographs—she doesn't feel the intense need for food that she used to.
- **Spread the wealth.** When Jacobs didn't want to pay a premium to hire a trainer to come to her house, she invited some neighbors to join. The women, all in their 60s and 70s, now work out together 3 or 4 days a week and drink espresso afterward.

Determined to make a change, Jacobs decided to sell her company, a move that prompted her to explore improvements in other areas of her life—including her battle with eating. When she found an online course called Truce with Food, created by integrative health coach Ali Shapiro, Jacobs felt a surge of hope. The program promised to teach her how to stop making food her enemy and instead use it to nourish and energize her body.

"It taught me how to holistically care for myself," says Jacobs, by choosing healthy foods that balanced her moods and diminished her cravings. "For the first time in my life, I started enjoying food and the way it made me feel," she adds. Within 6 months, she lost 40 pounds and was able to stop taking depression medication for the first time in 3 decades.

Over the next 7 years, Jacobs used books and online programs to continue to work on her relationship with eating, further transforming her emotional association with food from antagonism to enjoyment. Little by little, her view of her body became more accepting, and eating became more pleasurable.

Now she's down 60 pounds, her cholesterol and blood sugar have dropped into healthy ranges, and she finds delight in every bite. "I've been to Paris 10 times," she says. "And it's freeing that when I'm there, I can eat chocolate mousse whenever I feel like it, knowing I have the tools to center myself nutritionally when I get home."

3 More Ways to Drop Pounds

Here's how these determined women achieved their goals. Let their techniques fuel your own get-slim solution.

Lost 10 pounds!

"I started eating dinner for breakfast."

Former federal agent Myrna (Ma) Velez, 45, regularly competes in obstacle course races and strong-woman competitions. But even she had trouble shaking a stubborn 10 pounds after she suffered an injury, a financial setback, and the death of her grandmother a few years ago. What helped her get back on track: "I stopped eating heavy meals at night," she says. Instead, she started having what she might have had at dinner for breakfast. "Seriously, I will have pepper steak and rice at 10 AM."



Lost 40 pounds!

"Sharing my story online changed everything."

If you visit Julie Farmer's blog, *The Weight of My Weight*, you'll notice one thing right away: She's honest. And thorough. Farmer, 50, has published her thoughts, recipes, and exercise plans for 6 years. "I'm constantly telling people what I'm going to do, and then I feel obligated to do it," she says, a technique that helped her lose the weight and keep it off.



Lost 55 pounds!

"Hiking changed my body and my life."

After Shanti Hodges, 45, gave birth to her son 4 years ago, she was overweight—and creative. Instead of going to a typical parenting group that meets indoors, she decided to invite a few new-mom acquaintances on a hike.

Flash-forward to today: Hodges turned her idea into an organization called Hike It Baby, which now has 320 branches and more than 100,000 members. And she's lost 55 pounds along the way.

