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Excerpted from Chapter 9 Maintenance

The Red Alert of Defensive Eating

Giving up offensive dieting takes guts! After all, the glory of dieting for many patients is that weight loss is noticed, commented on and the “talk of the town.” (“Do you know Sally, she must have lost 100 pounds this year.” “Yeah I know but I bet she won’t keep it off.” “Yeah, nobody does.”) Most people who diet today are “offensive dieters.” They forge ahead like tanks on a desert, watching the scale go down, conquering pound after pound only to find that just when the battle seems won they become routed by the enemy, pull back, and regain the weight. These patients have never set up “defensive perimeters” in their eating style. They essential have “crash dieted.”

Going into new territory requires such a different lifestyle that they could not hope to last there, even a short while. Just like in war, the farther you go into new territory, the harder it is to defend it! The enemy can cut off your supply lines, surround you, and route you. Ultimately, you can be destroyed, captured, and imprisoned in a world of defeat, shame, hopelessness, and depression. The further you go down in weight, the more vulnerable the supply lines become.

Each diet you try requires defensive patterning. Each change must be secured fully. When supply lines are formed, they must be defended

and tested against the enemy. The enemy in weight loss has many “faces.” Sabotage, visual cues, and lack of assertiveness can all erode your supply lines and ability to keep off weight. A defensive eating style is your only protection. Indeed, anybody who fails at a diet, fails because of a breakdown in defensive style. The good news is that with practice and a realistic battle plan, permanent weight loss is achievable.

Let’s talk about defensive eating style and how to avoid being “Pearl Harbored.” As in times of peace, the patient who has successfully lost weight must defend his or her weight loss. In other words, maintaining weight loss requires a continuation of basic background patterns. Just like our national defense is on guard all the time for encroaching enemies, the dieter has a series of techniques that permit him or her to keep the weight from returning.

For many, the techniques used are the same as those used to lose the weight. Then you may ask, “What’s the difference?” This could easily be understood by looking at how our nation is defended. We still have an army, a navy, and an air force. They still practice all the maneuvers of warfare and battle. But in times of peace, nobody notices. In other words, just like maintaining lost weight, there is little happening on the surface. Things are peaceful and quiet, but in the background our troops are ready and alert at all times. Now on the surface there is little glory defending our nation in peacetime, yet the effort needed to keep our guards in shape and on guard is just the same. They must be ready to fight at an instant’s notice. They boringly go through their maneuvers day after day with pretty much little public recognition and no glory whatsoever, yet they are always ready.

Our patients who have successfully dieted are in the same position as our troops. Whether you lose ten pounds or a hundred pounds, keeping weight off and maintaining the new weight is boring business. It is peacetime and there is no war, yet you, the patient must continue to maintain all the patterns and techniques you used when you were in battle. It is hard to do this. It requires continually brushing up on your technique.

Though I have lost 40 pounds myself, it happened twenty years ago. People who know me no longer comment on how good I look. It is “old hat” now. I am wearing the same size clothes. I look at the scale and stay within five to seven pounds of a goal weight that I defend. The glory of watching the scale go down is gone, in fact it is usually this boring pattern that sabotages so many dieters who have tried to continue to lose weight or who have lost weight and hope to maintain. Weight maintenance is a monotonous business. It is easy to just give up and “go with the flow.” You, the patient, must understand that all those behavioral techniques you

have learned just don't disappear with the weight loss. They become part of your everyday lifestyle and hopefully you practice them with vigor just as well as you did when initially losing the weight.

So how do I maintain the new weight without being routed?

The answer again lies with our nation's defense. I set up a set of early warning signals. Some of these signals are obvious, "Gee, my pants feel tight," "My belt has to be loosened." But the most critical thing I set up is the all-important Red Alert System.

When I am in trouble, I sound this alert. My defensive perimeter is at a weight of 160 pounds. Anything below this weight creates security for me and my body. Should my weight go beyond 160 pounds, I sound the red alert. "Battle stations, battle stations!" I call on all my behavioral techniques and I pay much closer attention to what I eat and how I behave with food. This is just like our national defense. Should an unknown aircraft fly into our territory and be captured on radar, a red alert is sounded. Our well-trained troops and air force immediately take care of the situation. Once the enemy is gone, it is peacetime again.

So we see that for weight maintenance to last, a red alert defense system must be set up. For every maintenance weight loss we are to achieve, we have a red-alert number. Even those of you who want to only lose ten pounds and keep it off will set up this red-alert number.

In a sense, every "gray shade" of weight loss that one achieves must be assigned a red-alert number. It is this number that tells you that you are in trouble and must intensify your effort with weight control. We all know that typically most patients see weight loss as black or white. They go into battle with the glory of losing lots of pounds. They think they have done well, then comes the birthday, vacation, or other celebration. They think they could just get back in control, but what happens? They develop scalitis as the numbers go up, then they feel defeated. Unfortunately, they regain all the weight, as they never set up one defensive perimeter with an early red-alert warning system.

Let's look at the patient whom we described earlier. She had lost only eight to twelve pounds in weight. She felt secure with the behavioral techniques she had chosen to achieve this weight but had a "rocky course" even with the seemingly simple ten to twelve pound weight loss. She had to be convinced that winning even this minor battle was a major success. She hit a Red Alert two times during even this minor weight loss routine, but she still successfully defended her Red Alert number. Remember that one year ago she had lost much more weight—seventy-five pounds! But she was immediately routed and never truly maintained

her weight there. Remember that weight maintenance takes time. Before a battle is a success, you must prove you can “weather” all kinds of uncertainties. You essentially must trench in for the long haul.

Yo-yo’ers never do trench in; they generally regain all the weight back within two years. Remember the more the weight loss, the more vulnerable the supply lines. Keeping these behavior-modification techniques going gets rougher and requires even more practice. Many dieters in our society are unrealistic about their goal weights. They develop the “Thinderella Syndrome,” thinking that if they can reach that magic number, they will do anything to keep it there. They use unsafe methods to lose unsafe quantities of weight. They set themselves up to fight a battle that can never be won. They become martyrs. “Remember so-and-so who lost 100 pounds, wasn’t that great!” “Too bad she gained it all back.”

The one thing I must ask you to be is realistic—this is not a fairytale. This is your life, your health, and your well-being. Movies are about people who lose a hundred pounds in six months, keep it off, line up a modeling career, and end up on the cover of *Mademoiselle*. Real life is about successfully losing weight to a realistic number in a healthy fashion and keeping it there.

Setting up a Red-Alert number can be difficult. Should I lose ten pounds, twenty pounds or more before plateauing and defending. The answer really lies in the behavioral techniques you choose and the intensity with which they are practiced. A better question I may ask my patients is, “How comfortable are you with the changes you have made? Can you continue these changes at this intensity indefinitely?”

If the answer is yes, I ask: “Well, what weight have you gotten down to practicing these specific pattern changes?” The number will vary depending on initial weight starting out and whether the person is a male or female. Whatever this number is, I usually tag on five to eight pounds leeway and tell the patient this is your “Red-Alert number.”

For example, John Doe weighs 220 pounds and loses 30 pounds to plateau at 190 pounds. Understanding that day-to-day weight changes vary, I ask John to give me a range of weight he has had over the past month. He tells me he has weighed between 188 and 193 pounds. I give him my Red-Alert number of about 196 pounds. Now this 196, if hit, will tell John to sound the battle stations and get him more intense about his behavioral techniques. At a weight of 190, he has leeway to go to an event or celebrate a party and gain two to three pounds without having a major emotional breakdown. He knows he is still within a safe perimeter.

Now, after several months John came to me and said he was ready to lose another ten pounds in weight. We worked on two minor behavioral techniques. John lost ten pounds over three months and now weighed 180 pounds. We changed the Red-Alert number to 186 pounds, once again giving him some leeway to regain several pounds based on day-to-day celebrations, vacations, and lifestyle events.

This concept of leeway is critical. Imagine two nations that have warred but are now settling their differences. They set up a safety perimeter of three to four miles, a “demilitarized zone.” This zone helps define a true no-war zone. If a plane or truck strays off path, they are warned but not fired upon. Our own country sets up zones, such as this, off our coast. Ten miles is the “buffer zone” before our nation would be attacked. But it is within these ten miles that the warnings are issued. These buffer zones are critical—without them skirmishes could occur continuously and constantly.

The same holds true in weight loss. Without a buffer zone of several pounds, we would never be able to eat comfortably, thinking we might be in trouble with every one or two pounds gained within the normal day. Unfortunately, people who develop scalitis while dieting are susceptible to this very problem. You see them agonizing over a one to two pound weight gain, turning their concentration away from successful techniques and toward the almighty scale. They grieve a pound gained and celebrate a pound lost. But in the end, they really go nowhere. It becomes a mental game that ultimately is destructive, sabotaging, and ends in failure.

Sounding a Red Alert requires several other important cognitive techniques. One I call avoiding failure spirals (going down the old garden path). This usually occurs when one is negative about their diet because of several failure sequences. This reminds them of past failed diets. We have all had the experience in which we catch ourselves acting a certain way due to previous experience. One gets caught up in these negative spirals and can easily break through their red-alert numbers. These negative behavioral chains are what prevents us from plateauing when we start to fail at a diet. Instead we yo-yo right back up.

You all know that feeling, “What’s the use? I have gained back five of the twenty-five pounds I originally lost, this diet is impossible.” Or, “Why should I be successful anyhow? I always gain it back. I am too weak to do this diet. Maybe I’ll just start over again next year.” It is this continuous bombardment of negative thought that drives the yo-yo’er right back up. It is called the old garden path, but for dieters it is a negative spiral cycle that leads to permanent failure and even the fear of being successful.

The Red-Alert number can help. It must be sounded as it is the only warning signal that is concrete and real. Here is an example in which an exact number is critical. Unlike losing weight, which depends on a change in behavioral patterns, sounding a Red Alert is critically number-oriented, black and white with no gray zones. It is pretty much the opposite of what we encourage people to do when they start the diet. This is very purposeful because a Red Alert is a warning system. You can't wait for the enemy to make a major attack: Even a minor attack is an attack and must be dealt with. Appeasement does not work. It only weakens the Red-Alert number.

If I bargain with myself to move the Red-Alert number up a few pounds, I start to erode the very reason why a red alert is assigned. The Red-Alert number is a "Mr. Spock" rational number, not to be played with. If you are in a severe negative spiral and hit the Red-Alert number, you should contact your weight practitioner for immediate help. He or she will help you get back on track before you are completely defeated.

Remember if you practice behavior modification the correct way, you will only get into limited trouble because the gray zones learned are like steps that gently go up and down. If you crash-diet, it is like jumping to the top of a mountain with no steps, and here when you fail, you fall all the way to the bottom. Developing a feeling of self-confidence becomes critical here.

I generally hit my Red Alert four to five times per year. When this first happened to me, it was a bit nerve-wracking. I questioned myself: "Are the techniques I practiced the correct ones; are they practiced well enough?" After I was able to conquer my Red-Alert number several times, I gained confidence in my techniques and myself. I looked at hitting the Red Alert as a test of my lifestyle and my conviction not to ever regain the weight I had lost.

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