

# The Psychology and Neuroscience of Sustainable Weight Loss

# Susan Peirce Thompson, Ph.D.

# Introduction...



# The Problem

- There is a global obesity pandemic



# It's as Bad as You Think

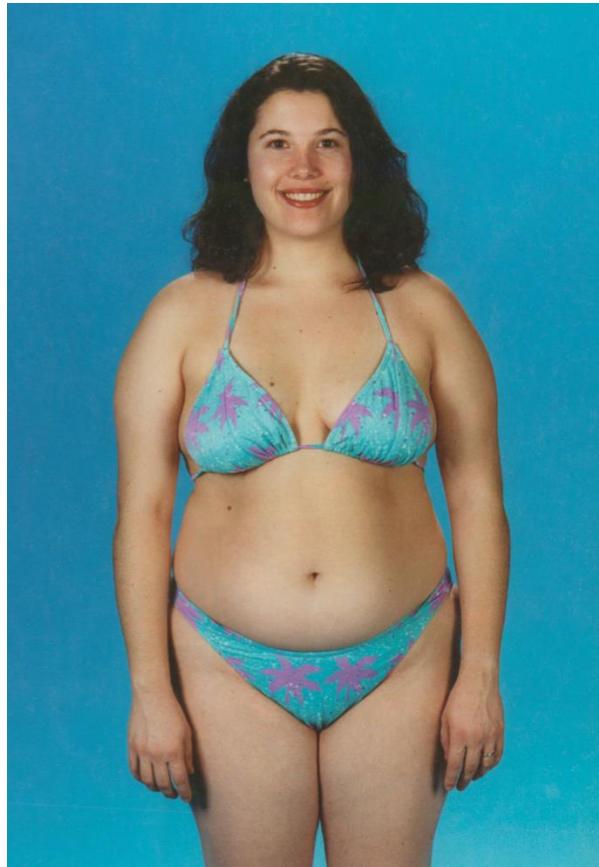
- 2.1 billion people are overweight or obese
- In the USA, 108 million people are on a diet
- Obesity is now a bigger problem in developing nations than malnutrition
- China and India lead the world in numbers of overweight people
- The Middle East has the highest per-capita rates of Type 2 Diabetes – 40%
- 75% of people are dying prematurely from diet-related diseases

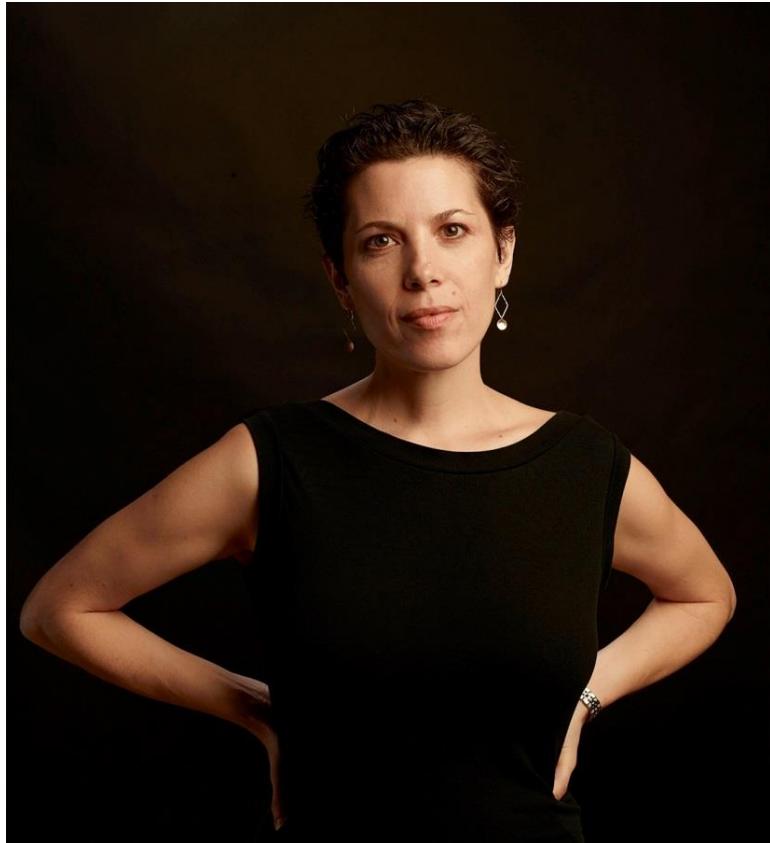
# ...And Worse

- Over the next three years, a new McDonald's will be opening in China ***every single day***
- Over the next 20 years, we will spend an estimated \$47 trillion dollars on diseases caused by the Global Industrial Diet
- Over 99% who try to lose weight do not get slender and stay slender long-term



1. How and why are so many millions being stymied in their weight-loss attempts?
2. Why can some people maintain a healthy weight, while others struggle?
3. What does it really take?





# It's Not Just About Weight

- Plenty of slender people struggle with their eating too
- 17% of slender people qualify as full-blown food addicts
- We need a solution that addresses not just ***weight*** but ***food obsession***
- ***Happy, Thin, and Free!***

# Question #1

- Question: How and why are millions of people being stymied in their weight-loss attempts?
- Answer: Their **brains** are **blocking** their attempts to lose weight
  - This happens in **three** main ways
  - To lose weight and keep it off, you must understand and work with your brain

# #1 The Wiring of Willpower

- The first huge mistake that people make when they try to lose weight is they rely on their willpower

# A Crash Course in Willpower

- 1998: The Radish Experiment



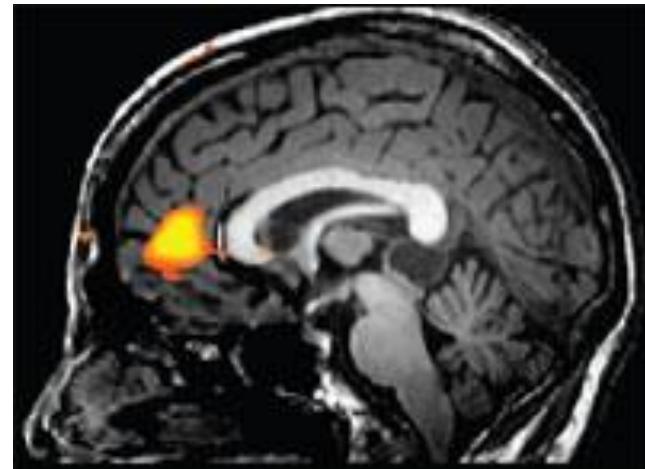
- Willpower is like a muscle that can be fatigued through use

# How Does Willpower Work?

- Willpower is like a battery
- The things we do all day everyday deplete our willpower stores
  - Resisting temptations
  - Persevering on a task
  - Regulating emotional responses
  - Redirecting attention
  - Making decisions – (like checking email)
- We make an average of 119 food-related decisions each day

# The Anterior Cingulate Cortex

- When willpower stores are depleted, activity in the anterior cingulate cortex slows down to a crawl



- Fueled by brain glucose

# “The Willpower Gap”

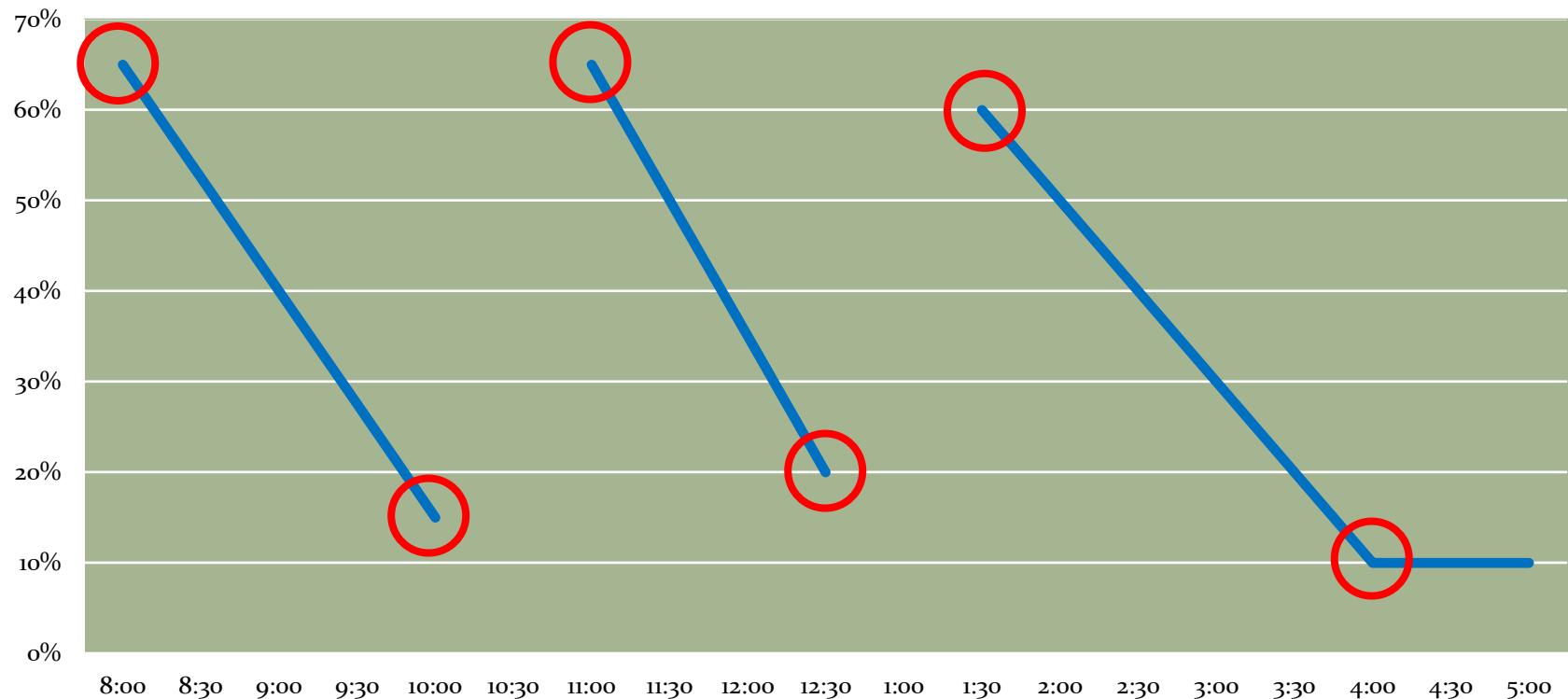


# An Illustration: The Legal System

- Two schools of thought:
  1. Lady Justice is blind and impartial
  2. Justice hinges on “What the judge ate for breakfast”



# The Minute-by-Minute Data



# How Can You Know You're Depleted?

- Is there a way these judges could know they had run out of willpower?
  - Depressed? No.
  - Angry? No.
  - Unhappy? No.
- The effect of willpower depletion on behavior is large, but the effect on subjective experience is far more subtle

# The Telltale Sign

- The telltale sign is that the volume on life feels like it's turned up
- Stronger reactions
  - A sad movie makes you sadder
  - A traffic jam makes you more frustrated
  - Ice-cold water feels more painful
  - Challenging life circumstances feel more catastrophic
  - Temptations pull more strongly

# What Should You Do About It?

- Key #1:
- You must take the load off of willpower
- How?

# A Curious Finding

- Roy Baumeister & colleagues developed an instrument to measure people's willpower
- Interestingly, the people who score the very highest on the instrument are also those who use their willpower the least

# How Can This Be?

- They use their willpower *in advance* to avoid having to use it in the future
- They have ***BRIGHT LINES***
  - Clear, unambiguous boundaries that you don't cross no matter what
  - Very effective at bolstering willpower
- They build ***RITUALS***

# The Power of the Automatic Brain

- Did anyone here brush their teeth this morning?



# The Emergency Action Plan

- Several activities have been scientifically shown to replenish willpower
  - Getting social support
  - Cultivating gratitude
  - Meditation
  - Prayer
  - Sleep

# Armed With This Science...

- ....we can evaluate conventional wisdom when it comes to weight loss
- Q: Does this advice TAX willpower or take the load OFF of willpower?

# Example #1

- Meal timing and frequency
- “Eat several small meals throughout the day”
  - “Keep your metabolism revving”
    - Fallacy
  - Don’t let your blood sugar drop
    - Fallacy

# The Straight Scoop

- The big problem with eating many small meals throughout the day, or grazing nonstop, is that it taxes your willpower **ALL DAY LONG**
- Interferes with automaticity



# Example #2

- Exercise
- Exercise is pretty useless for weight loss
- Eating right is critical for weight loss
- Exercise burns up willpower



# My Exercise Recommendations

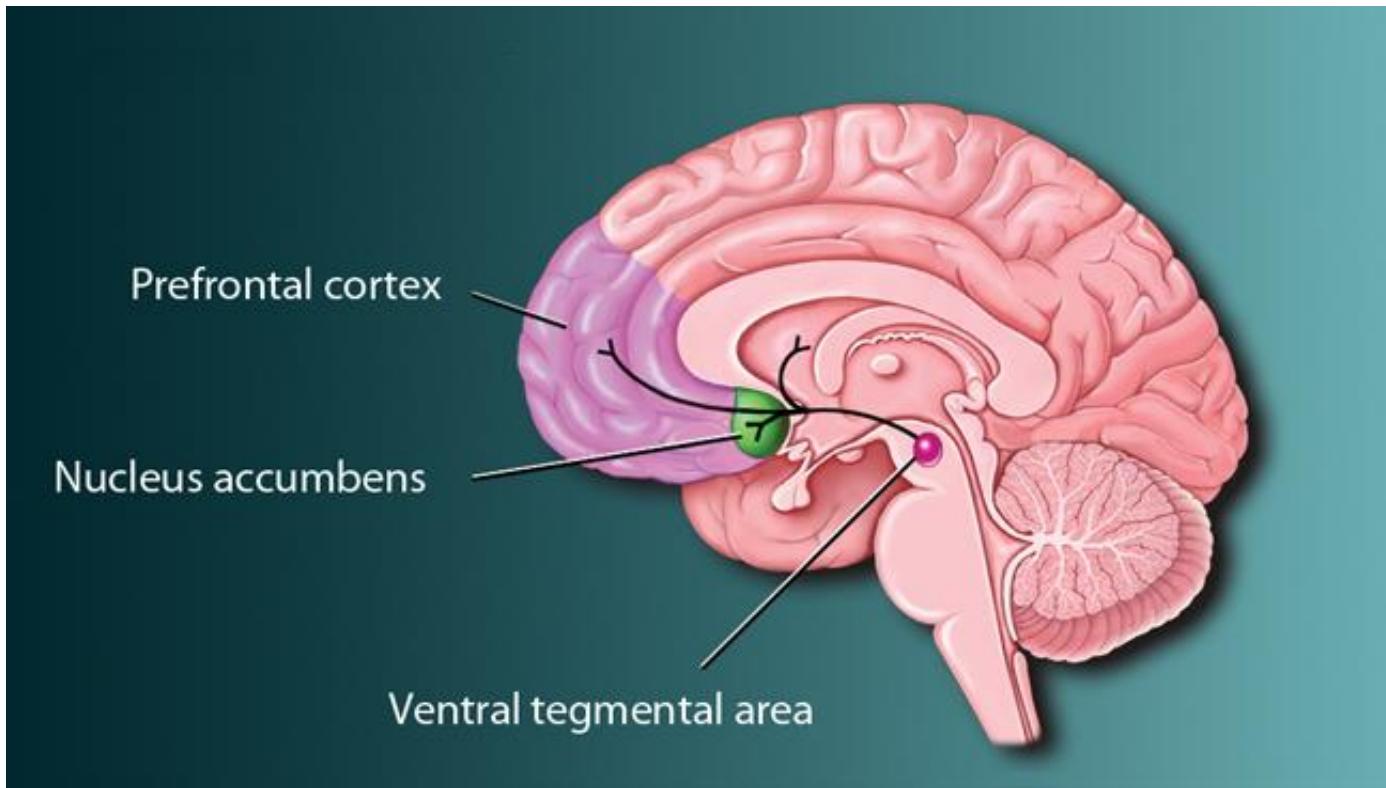
- Exercise is incredibly healthy in just about every way
- Just don't start exercising at first
- Wait until rock-solid habits of healthy eating have become automatic

# Recap:

1. How and why are so many millions being stymied in their weight-loss attempts?
  - Their brains are blocking their attempts to lose weight
    - #1 Willpower
    - #2 Cravings

# Cravings

- Dopamine / Reward Pathway
- MOTIVATION



# Key #2:

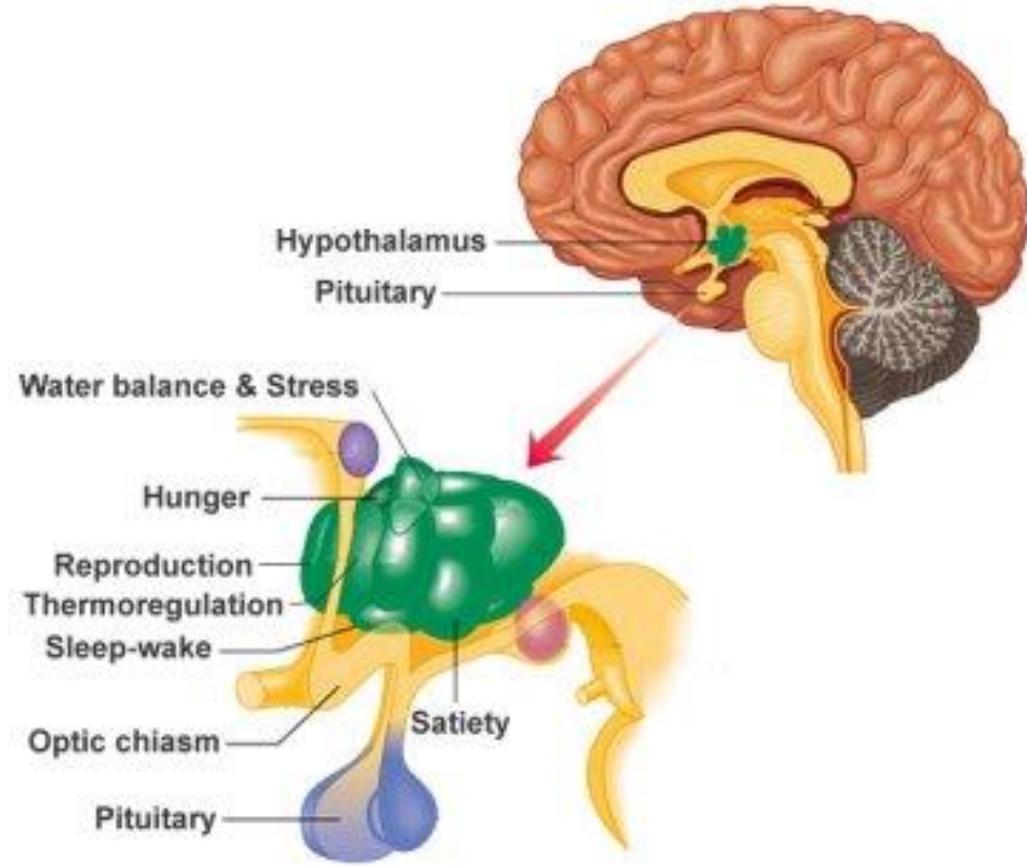
- Stop flooding the brain with dopamine

# Recap:

1. How and why are so many millions being stymied in their weight-loss attempts?
  - Their brains are blocking their attempts to lose weight
    - #1 Willpower
    - #2 Cravings
    - #3 Hunger

# The Source of Hunger

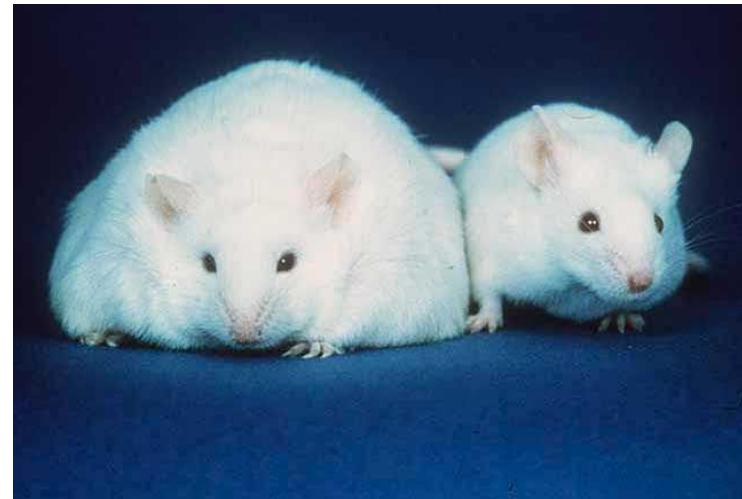
- The hypothalamus
  - Hormones



# The Role of Leptin

- Leptin is a hormone that is secreted by our fat cells

- I'm not hungry
- I feel like exercising

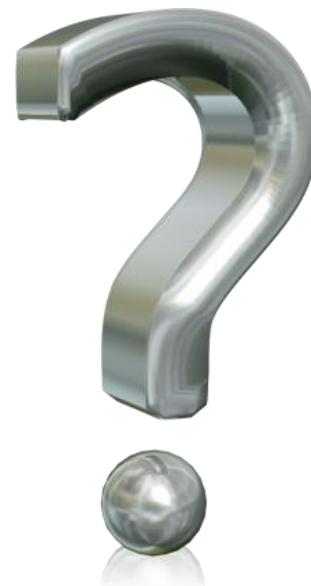


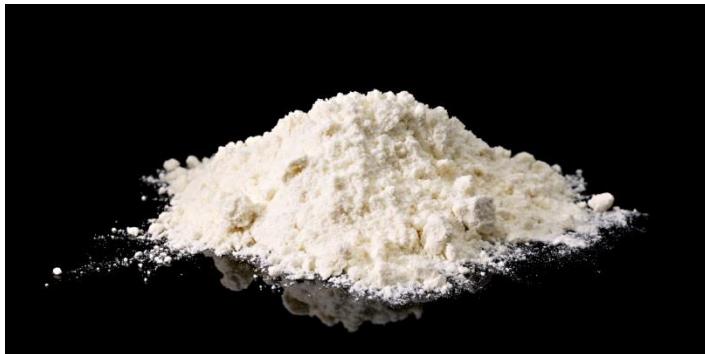
# Key #3:

- Lower insulin levels

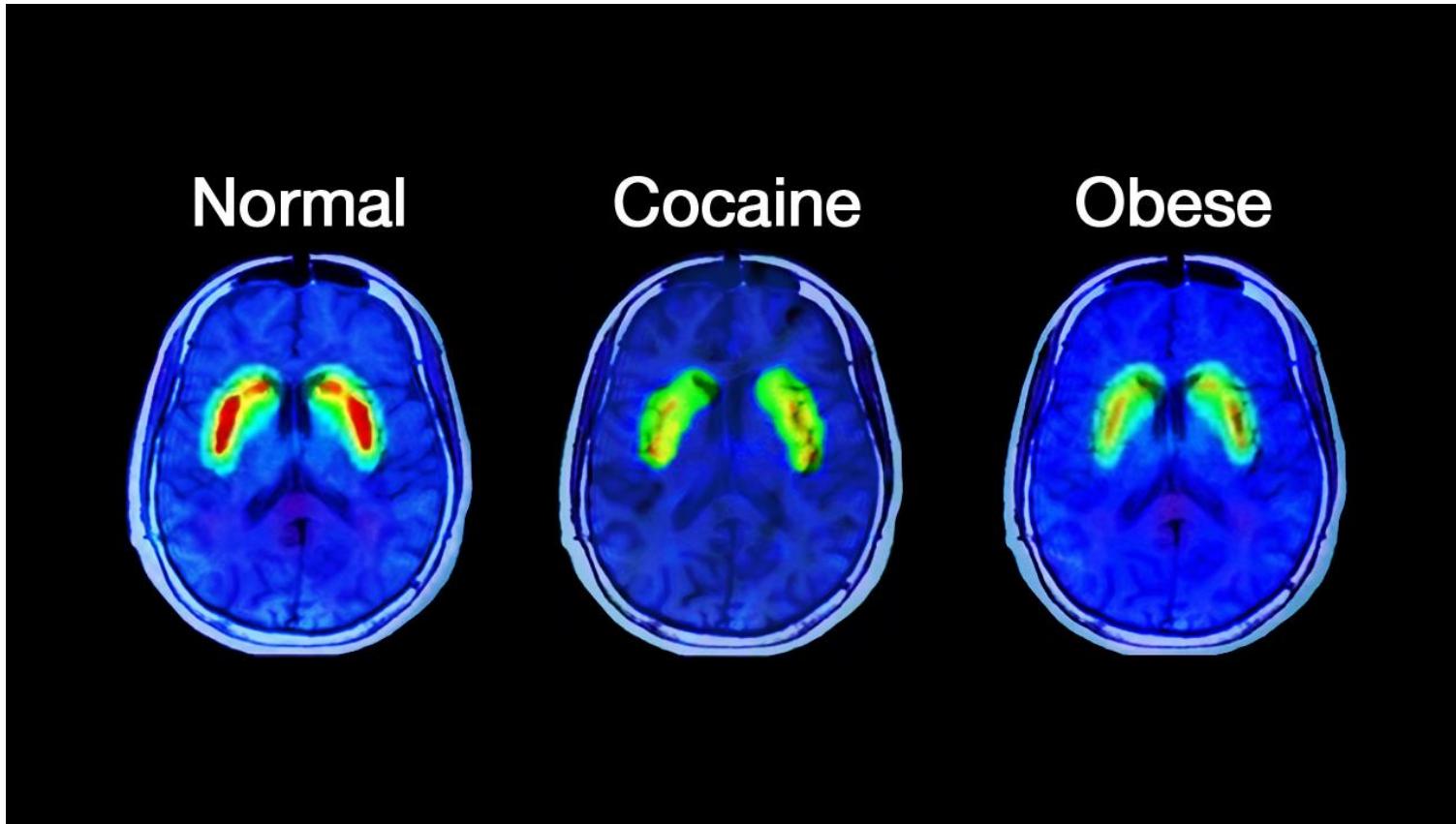
# Question:

- What floods the brain with dopamine?
- What raises insulin levels?
  - **SUGAR**
  - **FLOUR**





# PET Scans of Dopamine



# The Smoking Gun





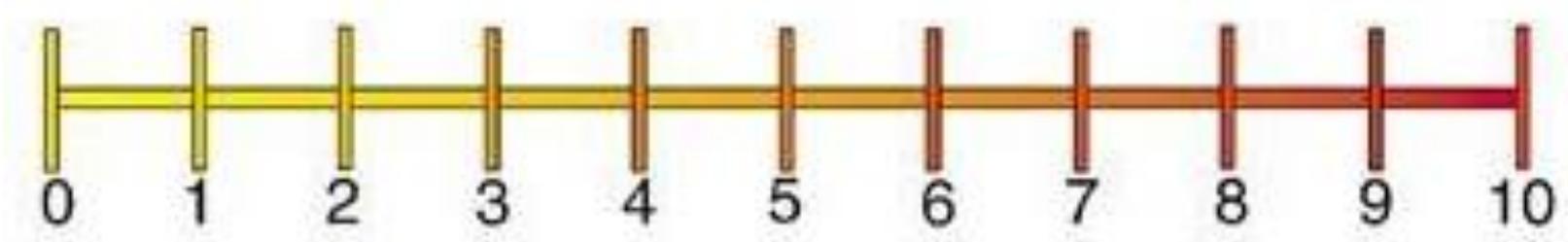
# Question:



# Our Outline

1. How and why are so many millions being stymied in their weight-loss attempts?
2. Why can some people maintain a healthy weight, while others struggle?
3. What does it really take?

# The Susceptibility Scale



1/3

1/3

1/3

- Animal data
- Human data

- 56% obese women / 43% obese men
- 30% overweight
- 17% lean

1/3

# Implications

- One size does NOT fit all
- People survey the landscape from their own vantage point
- A sensible eating plan might work really well...if you could stick with it
- But 1/3 of the population is high on the Susceptibility Scale and disproportionately sabotaged by the willpower gap, hunger, and cravings

# Question:

- WHY are some people high on the Susceptibility Scale while others are low?
- What causes this difference?

# Answer:

- Some people are naturally more sensitive to the cues that predict rewards
- This is true in rats as well
- To illustrate...

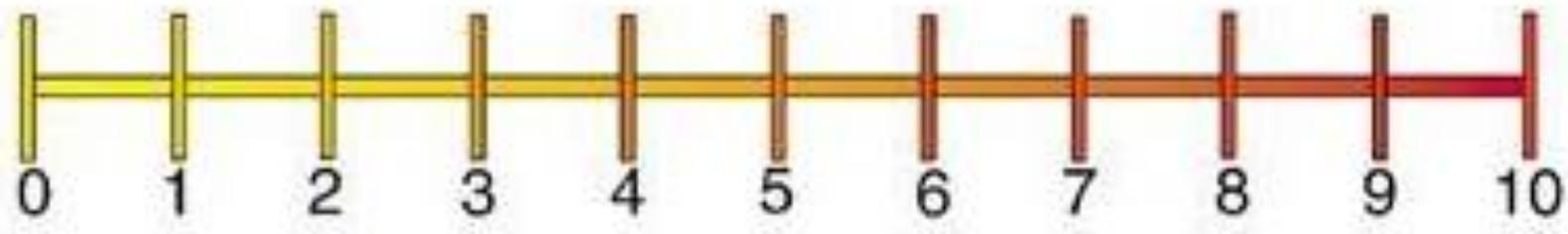
# Goal Trackers vs. Sign Trackers



# The Results

Goal Tracking

Sign Tracking



1/3

1/3

1/3

# Why?

- What causes some rats to be especially sensitive to the cues that predict rewards?
  - Genetic
  - Environmental

# Think About This...

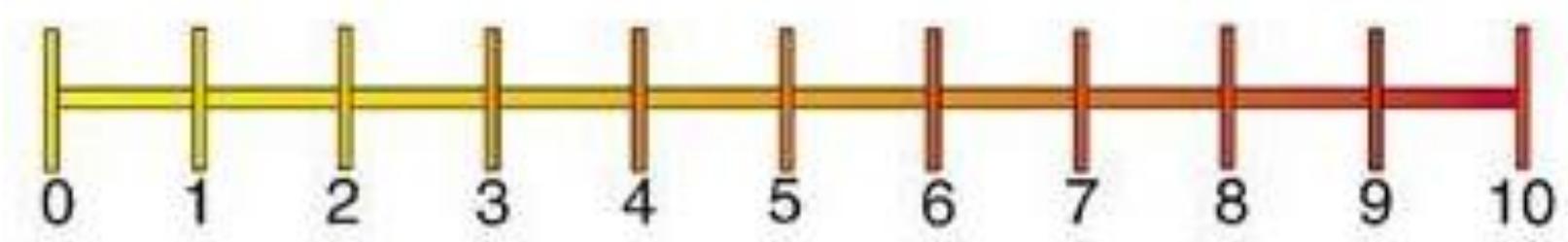
- What are the implications of having a brain that is especially sensitive to the cues that predict food rewards in our society?



# Our Outline

1. How and why are so many millions being stymied in their weight-loss attempts?
2. Why can some people maintain a healthy weight, while others struggle?
3. What does it really take?

# The Susceptibility Scale



1/3

1/3

1/3

# It Depends

- For people who are low on the Susceptibility Scale, conventional wisdom might work (emphasis on “might”)
  - Reduced calories (as opposed to cutting out highly processed foods)
  - Exercise
  - “Cheat day”
  - Many small meals

# For People Who are Higher

- Conventional wisdom is likely to backfire entirely
- Get the brain on board
- An integrated system:
- ***BRIGHT LINE EATING***
- Five brain-based suggestions for weight-loss success

# The Basics

- Develop a regimen
  - Increase your willpower stamina
- Eat for sustained blood glucose
- Build in habits and automaticity
- Take the load off of willpower as much as possible

# Suggestion #1:

## 1. Stick to Bright Lines

- No sugar
- No flour
  - Stabilize blood glucose (avoid willpower crashes)
  - Lower insulin to get leptin on board
  - Let dopamine receptors repopulate

# Suggestion #2

## 2. Have a food plan

- Shrinks the 119 decisions to a more manageable number
- A good food plan includes both categories & quantities for every meal

# Suggestion #3

## 3. Plan ahead

- Props up willpower by reducing on-the-fly choices when you may be depleted
- Makes the right thing to eat the easiest thing to eat

# The #1 Thing You Can Do

- Write down your food the night before

# Suggestion #4

## 4. Engage in regular monitoring

- Nightly checklist sheet
- Little book by the fridge
- Graph paper by the scale

# Suggestion #5

5. Have an Emergency Plan that you can activate in times of temptation
  - Social Support: Call or text a friend
    - Join a community!
  - Meditate
  - Pray
  - Get grateful
  - Sleep

# Five Actions to Rewire Your Brain for Success

- Stick to Bright Lines
- Have a food plan
- Write down your food the night before
- Continuously monitor your actions and your progress
- Have an emergency plan written down that you can activate when you get tempted

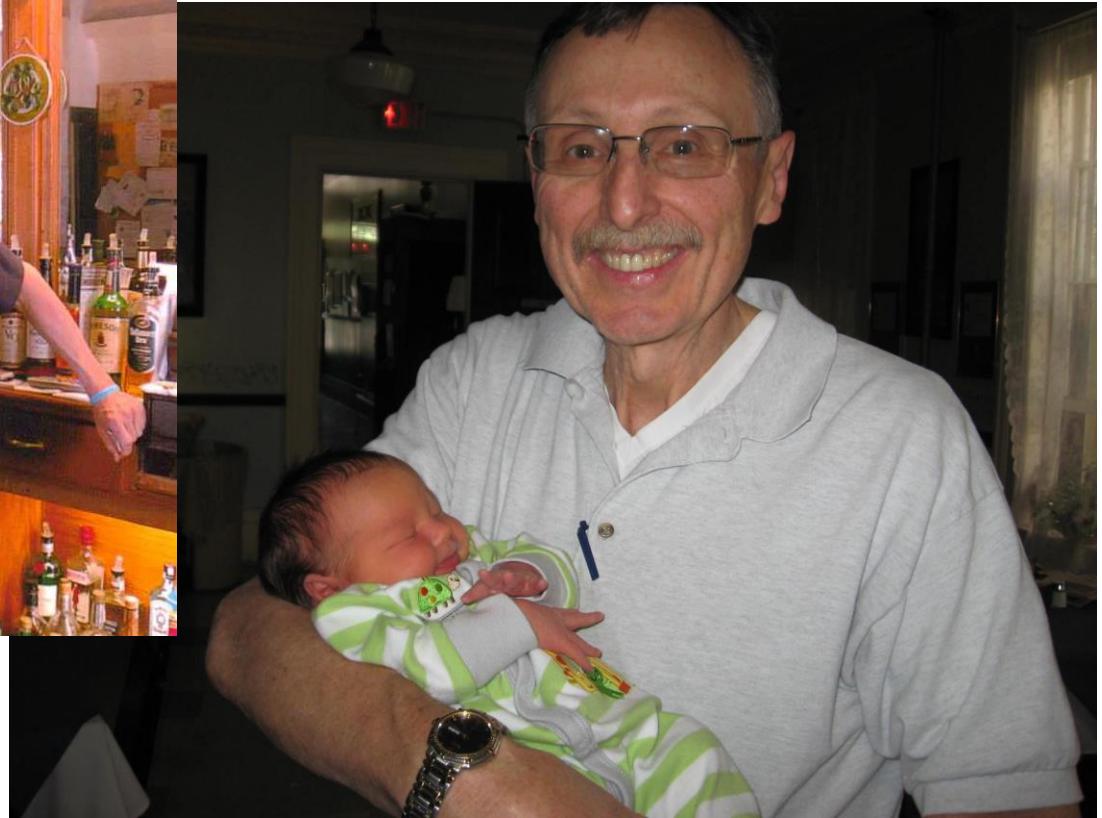
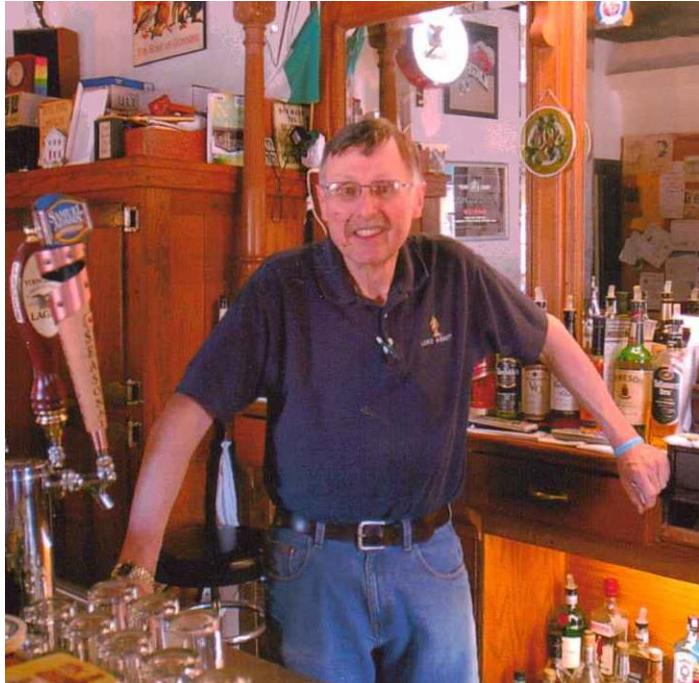
# Pat Reynolds



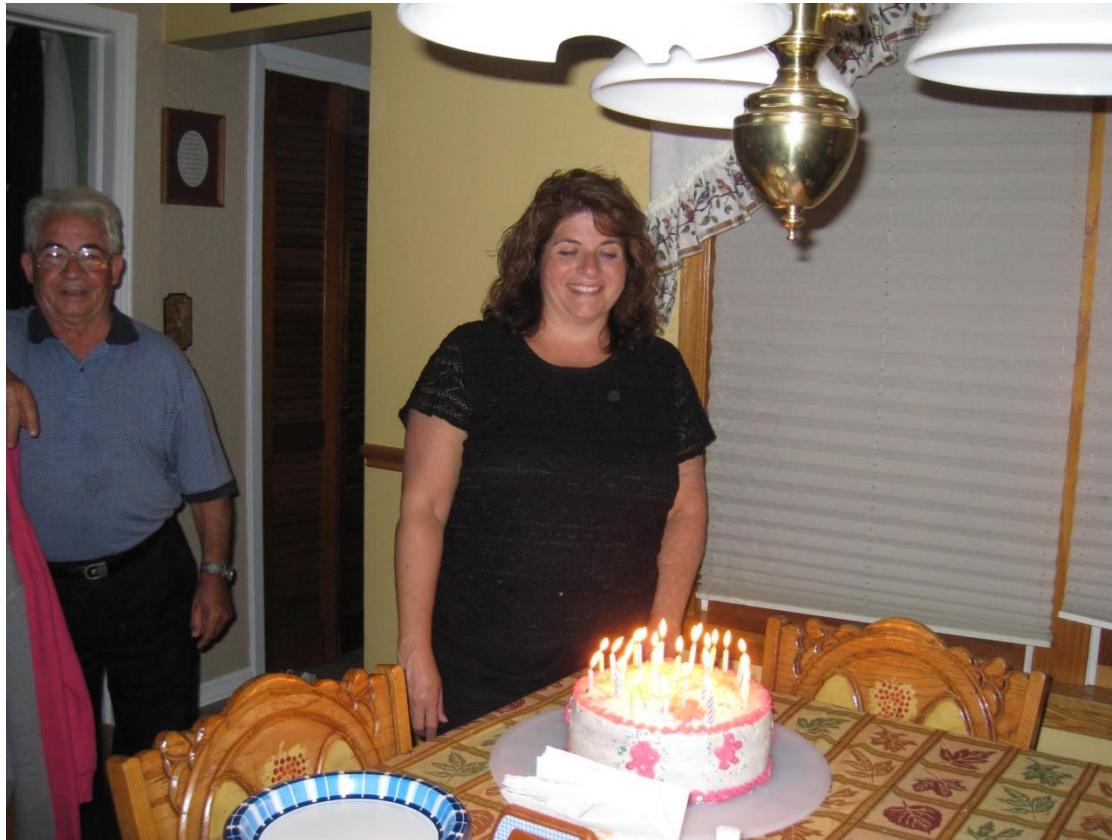
# Pat Reynolds



# Pat Reynolds



# Teresa Stawicki



# Teresa Now



# Linden Morris DelRio



# Linden Morris DelRio



# What Makes Weight Loss Truly Sustainable

- **IT GETS EASIER**

- Insulin levels come down and leptin gets on board
- Dopamine receptors replenish and cravings reduce
- Willpower becomes more resistant to depletion
- Habits become automatic

# Self-Perception Theory



# Spread the Word...

- Refined foods are truly, physiologically addictive
- There is a Susceptibility Scale: Some people are more susceptible to their addictive pull than others

# Spread the Word...

- Complete abstinence from sugar & flour is a viable and empowering choice for many
- Bright Lines work for eating like they work for smoking
  - Should be supported and respected
  - Just like the choice to not drink or smoke is supported and respected

# Don'tcha Think?

- We can and should upgrade our social norms for expected foods at birthdays, holidays, restaurants, and public venues
  - We are paying the price
    - Obesity
    - Chronic diseases
    - Lethargy
    - Low self-esteem
    - Financial devastation

# Q & A TIME