

CHAPTER 1

Weight Is Not Just a Female Issue

The statistics couldn't be clearer: the world is getting fatter. Two-thirds of American adults are now overweight or obese. Men and women, empty nesters, and the newly married—the issue of excess weight touches the majority of households in some way. Clearly, achieving and maintaining a healthy weight are a desire and a need for millions of people.

As the world's leading provider of weight-loss services, Weight Watchers has over 40 years of experience helping both women and men lose weight with its comprehensive, proven program that focuses on lifestyle modification. In other words, by following a scientifically effective method that teaches people how to lead healthier lives in a realistic way, Weight Watchers members around the world are achieving lasting weight loss.

Over the years, Weight Watchers has learned a few things about

what makes people tick when it comes to weight issues. One of the lessons that has been most illuminating is the gaps between the sexes. The gender gap on the topic of weight is broader and deeper than that on just about any other health-related issue. Despite the huge negative impact that excess weight has on men and women alike, there has not been much medical or clinical research that has tried to understand the differences in how men and women think about weight, talk about their weight-related concerns, or approach weight loss. This book examines what is known about women, men, and weight loss. By exploring the differences, it seeks to provide an understanding of how the genders can join forces to lose weight successfully.

Weight-Loss Research Favors Women

In the world of medical research, men have traditionally been the guinea pigs. Until the past few decades, almost all research on major illnesses has focused on men. In fact, the male-favored gender gap has been criticized as discriminatory, and critics have suggested that it results in better medical care for men than for women. Why have scientists tended to focus their research on men? A key reason is that men are simpler to study from a biological perspective. They do not have the monthly and lifelong hormonal fluctuations that women have; researchers need to control for women's hormonal fluctuations when conducting medical research on them.

There is, however, one area in scientific research in which the vast majority of studies and study volunteers have been women: weight loss. Why? When researchers are recruiting participants for a weight-loss study, the majority of the volunteers are women. In general, weight-loss trials that are designed to include both men and women include 80 to 90 percent women and only 10 to 20 percent men. As you'll learn from this book, this is due to the fact that men tend to be less aware of their need to lose weight, and less focused on weight loss, than women.

The reality is that there are very few studies of weight-loss treatment involving men only in the published medical literature. In doing the research for this book, only three randomized clinical trials (the gold standard in research) done exclusively on men were found. And in the spirit of full disclosure, the condition being treated with weight loss in one of the studies wasn't even obesity—it was erectile dysfunction. The total number of men in the three studies combined was less than 300! That's not even a drop in the bucket compared with the thousands (if not millions) of women who have participated in women-only weight-loss studies.

The lack of male-oriented obesity research is unfortunate because it limits the available pool of knowledge on how best to help men lose weight. Just as women used to be treated for heart disease based on treatments that had been proved effective in men, weight-loss treatment strategies have largely come from studies done on women. Assuming that a man is just like a woman in dealing with weight-related issues is a mistake. Fortunately, *Weight Watchers* has a great deal of experience in helping men lose weight, and that expertise is shared throughout this book.

Different Sexes, Different Bodies

While the fundamental principles of weight loss are the same for both genders—expending more calories than are taken in—the elements that lead to the creation of the caloric deficit that invokes weight loss are not. Indeed, men and women are different; they are biologically different and emotionally different. Because both biology and psychology are integral to successful weight loss, these differences are extremely important.

The physical variations between the genders require little explanation. The body composition—that is, the proportions of muscle, bone, and fat that make up the male and female bodies—of men and women are quite different. A typical man who weighs 154 pounds

has 69 pounds of muscle, 23 pounds of bone, and 23 pounds of fat (the rest is organs, body fluids, and the like). A typical woman who weighs 125 pounds has 45 pounds of muscle, 15 pounds of bone, and 34 pounds of fat. In summary, men are genetically programmed to have more lean muscle mass and heavier bones than women. Conversely, women's bodies are designed to have a higher fat content.

Technically, the definitions of *overweight* and *obesity* are based on the presence of excess body fat (though Body Mass Index or BMI is used to categorize people's weight status—more on this in the next chapter). Here, too, the genders differ. Overweight in men is defined as between 21 and 25 percent body fat and obesity is defined as greater than 25 percent. Overweight in women is defined as between 31 and 33 percent body fat and obesity is defined as greater than 33 percent. Because biologically men are supposed to have less fat and women more fat, even men and women of the same height and weight should have very different body compositions.

Given the physical differences between the genders when it comes to body composition, it's not surprising that body fat recommendations for men and women are different as well. The recommendation for men ranges from 12 to 20 percent and that for women ranges from 20 to 30 percent.

Given their different body compositions, men have a biological advantage over women when it comes to losing weight. That advantage is explored in chapter 5.

Different Minds

Men and women are not only different physically; their psychological makeup is distinct as well. The emotional differences between men and women are an area of great interest. John Gray's 1992 book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* caught the attention of the

public, sparking discussions of the inherent differences between the genders when it comes to communication, reactions to problems, and sources of conflict.

Psychologists are not the only ones interested in how the mental processes of women and men differ; a great deal of work is going on in the world of basic science as well. Each year, more and more is being learned about the links between mental processes and physical functions, especially as they relate to neurotransmitters. A paper published in 2006 even theorized that the reason men smile less often than women can be accounted for by the way their respective brains are wired. It is well established that our behaviors in the realms of eating and physical activity are influenced by chemical signals in the brain. And while not much is known about those signals at this point, it is likely that there are gender differences there as well. As more is learned about how the brain affects mental well-being as it relates to excess weight as well as the likely impact of gender differences, relevant treatment options are sure to evolve.

The mental aspects of weight and weight loss cannot be overemphasized. The basic physiology of weight loss is relatively simple—in order to lose weight, fewer calories must be taken in than expended. But it is the behaviors—eating, exercise, and thinking—that are at the heart of achieving lasting weight loss. There are clear differences between men and women when it comes to weight-loss behaviors, and this book touches on all of them. Of particular interest are the differences as weight loss relates to how men and women use language, a topic explored in chapter 4.

A Word of Caution

This book draws on a variety of sources to sort out the gender differences and to provide practical insights and solutions so that both men and women can achieve lasting weight loss. Whenever possible,

clinical studies from the scientific literature are included at the back of this book. Because, as noted above, there have not been a lot of scientific trials done on this topic, we used additional sources of information as well.

Weight Watchers does a great deal of market research. From focus groups to segmentation studies and consumer surveys, Weight Watchers spends considerable time and money keeping a finger on the pulse of people who want and need to lose weight. Generally, companies doing such research keep close tabs on the results in order to maintain a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

Over the past ten to twelve years, Weight Watchers has amassed a lot of market research that has looked specifically at how the genders differ in the way they think about, talk about, and approach weight loss. In fact, Weight Watchers probably has more information on this topic than any other organization in the world. For the first time, the company has opened its vault of unpublished proprietary information and is including it in this book. As a result, what you'll find is a culmination of clinical and consumer research from which insights and understanding can be gleaned.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that any research—clinical or consumer—summarizes the findings involving a group of people. The reality is that any group of people is made up of individuals who differ. For example, while the research may have found that women are less likely than men to believe that the most effective way to lose weight is to exercise, that doesn't mean that there are not some women who believe this—they're just not as common. Based on this limitation, which is part of any research process, it is easy to develop stereotypes and make generalizations that don't hold true when it comes to individuals. The gender differences explored in this book are based on research findings. Odds are that not all of the findings will apply to any given man or woman.

It is important to use the findings as a starting point for understand-

ing what separates you from a potential weight-loss partner of the opposite sex. With that understanding, you can overcome communication barriers and together, as a couple, find a common ground that will lead to lasting weight loss.

