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- OPINION
- SPORTS
- LIFE
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- MARKETPLACE
- CLASSIFIEDS
- SPECIAL SECTIONS
- MULTIMEDIA

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Reading Eagle: Bill Uhrich | Tracy Benson of Lighten Up Nutritional Services in Spring Township holds a photograph of a 1925 beauty pageant that she uses to illustrate how all body types are considered attractive.

Pound for pound, solid advice

By Susan Shelly - Reading Eagle correspondent

Tuesday May 27, 2014 12:01 AM

Some people consider what Tracy Benson teaches to be controversial, but many others will tell you that it works.

A nutritional counselor for 32 years, Benson, 63, is the owner of Lighten Up Nutritional Counseling Services Inc. in Spring Township.

She has coached hundreds of men and women who together have lost thousands of pounds, and reduced or eliminated health problems and their need for medications.

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"When patients kind of hit a wall as far as being able to lose weight, she's a very good source," said Dr. Jaylaine Ghoubrial, a physician with All About Women in West Reading. "She personalizes the weight loss program for each person, and I think that makes her more successful."

Benson is particularly successful with diabetic clients, who account for about half of her practice.

"Doctors send their diabetic patients to me because I teach them how to change the way they eat, lose weight and come off of their medications," Benson said.

Darnall Daley is one of those patients.

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Darnall Daley's story

Darnall Daley, 76, of Wyomissing had been looking for a successful weight loss program for nearly his whole life when he heard Benson speak at a Rotary Club meeting in 2009.

He liked her approach, and the fact that she had first-hand experience with losing weight.

"For all those years I'd been getting advice from people with 13-inch waistlines," Daley said. "Then Tracy spoke at Rotary and told us she had once weighed more than 200 pounds. And I thought, 'Damn, this gal might actually know something.' "

When he signed on as Benson's client, Daley weighed 310 pounds and was suffering from diabetes, high blood pressure and other health problems.

"I couldn't walk up the stairs without breathing heavy," Daley said.

Daley and Benson came up with a plan that addressed exercise, caloric intake, ratio of carbohydrates and other factors, and Daley got to work.

A little more than a year later, Daley had lost about 80 pounds and, with approval from his doctor, was able to stop taking his diabetes medicine.

Losing the weight and maintaining the weight loss has not been easy, but has become a way of life for Daley, who teaches at Penn State Berks.

He avoids nighttime snacks, uses a pedometer to measure how many steps he takes, tests his blood sugars every morning and makes sure he has at least four exercise days every week.

And he charts all of those behaviors on Excel spreadsheets, which he said provides positive reinforcement.

"I can tell you I have 434 consecutive days of no cookies, cake, candy or ice cream; I've gone 357 evenings without a snack; and I've exercised at least four days a week for 277 days," Daley said. "All that charting wouldn't work for some people, but I'm an engineer, and it works for me."

He still has one session a month with Benson, during which they fine-tune his routine and come up with solutions to any stumbling blocks.

"And, I get to take my charts and brag about my 434 days and she listens," Daley said. "Not many people would want to hear about that."

Cindy Hess' story

Cindy Hess, 60, of Temple recalled the day her orthopedic doctor finally leveled with her about her constant knee pain.

"He said that he could give me all the shots I wanted, but until I addressed my weight they wouldn't do me much good," said Hess, who had dieted, lost and regained weight for years.

The doctor referred Hess to Benson, who helped her set up a personalized program that addressed diet, exercise, food balances, how emotions affect eating and other factors.

Five years later, Hess, who owns Cindy's Pet Share, has lost more than 100 pounds and has much less trouble with her knees.

"It makes my work with pets a lot easier, that's for sure," Hess said.

She is able to maintain her weight loss by eating small three small meals and two snacks a day, totaling about 1,200 calories. And she still sees Benson once a week for reinforcement and strategy advice.

"Basically, it's been a lifestyle change," Hess said. "It's not a diet, it's a lifestyle change."

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Mary Ellen Leidy's story

Mary Ellen Leidy, 64, of Colebrookdale Township was referred to Benson by a health care professional in January 2013.

She and Benson came up with a plan, and Leidy hasn't looked back. In 16 months she's lost 145 pounds, has been able to stop taking diabetes medicine and has significantly reduced her other medications.

"I've tried everything, and this just clicked for me," Leidy said. "I made up my mind that I was going to do it, and I did."

She credits Benson with creating a plan customized to her, and of being interested in the overall welfare of her clients.

Benson also educated her about how to eat in restaurants or at special events, and how to modify her favorite recipes to make them healthier, Leidy said.

With Benson's encouragement, Leidy uses a treadmill or participates in water exercises several times a week. She continues to see Benson for counseling and support.

As a bonus, Leidy's husband, Thomas, 67, who drives his wife to her appointments and listens to Benson's advice, has lost 60 pounds.

Joe Descindio's story

Joe Descindio, 57, of Boyertown is a third-generation chef and restaurateur who has been overweight for nearly his entire life.

"My weight problem stems from a very early age," he said. "When I was a child, my parents would send me to summer weight loss camp in New York."

Inevitably, any weight he lost would return, and Descindio, who with his brother owns and operates Izzi's Tavern in Boyertown, became extremely frustrated.

"Frankly, I didn't know what to do," said Descindio, who also serves as a church organist. "I had tried everything."

Finally, a friend whose wife had started seeing Benson referred Descindio, and Descindio's life began to change.

"I've lost 130 pounds since the third week of January," he said. "I track my food for the whole week, and I've been able to start walking three times a week."

Descindio, who trained at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., is able to tweak his favorite recipes to make them healthier, or come up with new recipes that adhere to his new way of eating.

He has completely given up flour and sugar, and eats very little red meat. And, he said, he drinks a lot more water and gets a lot more sleep than he used to.

"It's just been a huge lifestyle change," he said.

Descindio credits Benson with helping him to realize that he was using food as a crutch and suffering from a form of addiction. Understanding why he was overeating has helped him be able to stop, he said.

While he has not yet met his goal weight, Descindio is optimistic that, with Benson's help, he will be able to do so.

"I just can't say enough about her knowledge of nutrition," Descindio said. "She has made me confident that eventually I will be a thin man. That addiction needs to be put away, and that's what I'm going to do."

For more information

Tracy Benson is the owner of Lighten Up Nutritional Counseling Services Inc. in Spring Township.

Benson knows first-hand the difficulties of losing weight, as she struggled with her own weight for years before finally finding a program that worked for her. She has maintained her weight loss for more than 30 years.

Although not a registered dietician, she has helped hundreds of people to lose weight and improve their health.

She is available for one-on-one nutritional counseling, group sessions and educational meetings. Benson also offers phone or Skype counseling for established clients.

She can be reached at 610-478-7766, or through her website at lightenupnutrition.com.

Tracy Benson's beliefs

Tracy Benson is not a registered dietician, but she has been a successful nutritional counselor for 32 years.

She has helped hundreds of people to lose weight; change their attitudes about food and exercise; understand the emotional and psychological components of overeating; overcome diabetes, high blood pressure and other medical problems; and live healthier, more productive lives.

Some of her beliefs and teachings:

- There are addictive components to food that, for some people, make it extremely difficult to control their eating. The most addictive aspects of food are sugars, fats and salt.
- After three days without these addictive components, your body will begin to stop craving them. "If you don't smoke, you don't require nicotine," Benson said. "And, if you don't eat sugar, you don't need it."
- When you eat can be nearly as important as what you eat. For most people, it's best to eat smaller amounts of food every four to five hours than large meals less frequently. Steady blood sugar levels maintain energy and keep you from feeling hungry.
- When choosing portion size, consider your height, weight and activity level. Most portions are geared toward adult males who weigh about 200 pounds and are moderately active.
- Eat within a half hour to an hour from the time you get up in order to get your metabolism up and running.
- Eat the best foods you can afford to buy, and look for the most minimally processed foods you can find. "The shorter the shelf life of a food, the better it is for you," Benson said.
- Look for foods that have no added sugar, high fructose corn syrup, hydrogenated oils or ingredients that you don't recognize or can't pronounce. Ask yourself if you could take the food product and recreate it with ingredients found in your kitchen? If not, don't buy it.
- Replace sugar with real stevia, which can be found in natural foods stores. It might seem expensive, but a small amount will last a long time as it is incredibly sweet.
- Eating well and exercising both are necessary for optimum weight and health. Walking and swimming are excellent forms of exercise for most people, and most should try to exercise for at least 40 minutes four days a week.
- Many people need to "rewire" their brains in order to accomplish lifestyle change. The first time you skip dessert, you may think "Oh, poor me." The second time it will seem easier to skip dessert, and by the third time you'll be thinking, "Wow, that feels good. I'm really proud of myself."
- It is harder for women to lose weight than it is for men. That's because women's bodies are designed to gain weight quickly during pregnancy and hold onto weight and fat in order to be able to nurse a baby. "In our ancestry, the thinnest women often wouldn't survive childbirth," Benson said.
- The ideal dinner plate for a woman in her mid-40s looking to maintain her weight would consist of raw or steamed vegetables covering at least half the plate, a four-ounce portion of lean protein and a

half-cup of whole grains, such as brown rice or lima beans.