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Your Money

Nutritional Insights on Saving Money

By [RON LIEBER](#)

Tired of advice from finger-wagging financial experts? You've come to the right place, because this week I'm turning to diet and nutrition gurus for advice on your money instead.

Various studies (and common sense) suggest that eating well pays off in a number of ways.

If you eat right, you'll have more energy. That makes you more likely to succeed at work and earn more money. Then, you'll be able to afford better food, stay healthy and spend less on medical costs. And the virtuous circle continues.

That's the way it's supposed to work. The reality — reflected in bulging waistlines and debt loads — is that Americans generally haven't shown much discipline at [McDonald's](#), the mall or in the [mortgage](#) market.

How do you start getting your financial life in better shape? Below, you'll find four tips drawn from the world of nutrition, intended to make self-control feel a bit less like deprivation.

Cut the Cues

The best book I read all week was "[Mindless Eating](#)." The author, Brian Wansink, a marketing professor at [Cornell University](#), also runs its [Food and Brand Lab](#). He argues that you eat what you eat because of what's around you, without even knowing it.

So the book sets out to teach people how to change their environment to remove the cues that make them overeat. Food storage containers and plates, for instance, ought to be smaller.

And don't clear the chicken bones, since the mess serves as evidence of how much you've already eaten.

The cues to spend money are more numerous than ever, thanks to the Internet providing instant and constant temptations to shop. One trick might be to keep your favorite retailers out of your e-mail in-box by getting off their newsletter lists.

Mr. Wansink has taken it a step further in his own life, removing the tools that prompted his response to the cues. As a collector of Herbert Hoover paraphernalia and the owner of several saxophones, he'd developed a bit of an [eBay](#) habit over the years. So he got rid of his PayPal account, which made it much harder to buy things from merchants on the site.

As for [Amazon](#), Mr. Wansink does not have an account. Only his wife does, and he makes a point of not remembering the username and password when he asks to use it. "Once you make some of these changes, they become so effortless, so natural, that you don't realize that you even made them in the first place," he said.

Hassle, in effect, overcomes habit.

Watch Your Portions

Another useful idea from the world of nutrition is portion control. [Lisa R. Young](#), who studied economics at Wharton as an undergraduate before turning to nutrition in graduate school, doesn't believe in diets. A diet, she writes in her book, "[The Portion Teller Plan](#)," is something you go on and then stop.

In her private practice, [Ms. Young](#) focuses not on banning the wrong foods but eating the right amount of everything, including treats. "If you tell people that they can never have sweets, it's like telling people they can never indulge in a Broadway show," she said. "They're not going to be happy because they're not going to have something to look forward to."

With clear limits for the portions of grains and starchy vegetables you eat each day, or the amount you spend on restaurants each month, you'll still have the freedom to indulge, mixed with a measure of control.

One online money management tool that uses similar ideas is [Mvelopes](#). It's designed to mimic an old-fashioned method of budgeting, where people would stuff cash into envelopes for the month's allocation for food, transportation, entertainment and the like. Mvelopes costs between \$7.90 and \$13.20 a month, though free services exist from [Mint](#), [Wesabe](#), [Geezeo](#) and [Quicken](#) that can also help track spending. The Web sites of some major [banks](#) have these tools too.

Keep Score

[Weight Watchers](#) is perhaps best known for its points system, where all foods have a value based on their calories, fat and fiber. So part of the deal is tracking all of the points you consume.

This sounds suspiciously like a line-item financial budget, the sort that most people hate keeping. Alas, recording everything you eat or anything you spend is also the quickest way to diagnose the things that are causing you problems.

On the money side, it's worth trying this once, at least for a week. The budgeting sites I mentioned above can track credit or debit card spending more easily than every last cash expenditure. As an alternative, you might just tote a notebook, or keep receipts and add them up at week's end.

If this feels like too much of a chore to keep up, consider one lesser-known part of the Weight Watchers process, the recording of feelings above and beyond the food points. When you hit your marks, or blow off your goals entirely, how do you react emotionally?

"If I decide I should be able to have beer and potato chips and ribs at the [Super Bowl](#) party, it's good to be able to evaluate that choice later so I have more information to bring to the next decision I make," said Laura Lindsey, a Weight Watchers group leader in Tampa, Fla.

"When I wake up Super Bowl Monday, and the chips are just a memory, and I feel anxious that I'm not going to weigh what I want to weigh, maybe I'll have just one beer and bring a veggie tray the next time I show up at a party."

For Ms. Lindsey, a law firm comptroller by day, the parallels to household finance are obvious. Sure, you can buy the high-definition television, she noted. After all, prices are coming down. But once it's hanging on the wall of your house, will you wonder each time you walk by it how much farther you are from the goal of having a bigger and better house to watch it in?

Count on Failure

Most diets don't work. Achieving and maintaining a healthy weight, particularly as you age and your metabolism slows, means at least some permanent change in your behavior. This can be hard to do, absent an intense health scare.

With money, however, it's actually pretty simple to make some enduring adjustments as long as you're willing to make the upfront effort to put the process on autopilot. Many companies will now automatically increase your [401\(k\)](#) savings a bit each year if you let them. You can ask your 529 college savings plan provider to pull money from your bank account each month too. Try it with \$25 and see if you miss the money, then raise the dollar amount as often as you can.

In addition to saving more, automation can also help you pay less. If your [credit card](#) company pulls money from you automatically, you won't ever pay late fees. If you pay your mortgage company a bit extra beyond the monthly payment, you'll work off the [loan](#) sooner and save on interest costs.

And with all of those extra savings, you'll probably have a bit more money left over for fresh fruits and vegetables.