

LIGHTER

The Realist's Guide to Losing Fat
and Keeping It Off

Fewer rules. The ones that matter. Results that last.

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A note on what this book is and isn't. This is an educational book about nutrition, training, and behavior change. It is not medical advice, and I am not your doctor. Weight and health are personal, and the right plan for you depends on things a book can't see: your medications, your history, your labs, whether you're pregnant, whether you have a heart condition or diabetes or a history of disordered eating. Talk to a licensed clinician before you change how you eat or exercise, especially if any of that describes you. If you have ever struggled with an eating disorder, some of the tracking advice here may not be safe for you — please work with a professional instead. Nothing in these pages promises a result. Bodies vary, and so do outcomes.

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Introduction: What ten years of yo-yo dieting taught me

I lost the same thirty pounds four times before I turned thirty. Cut carbs and lost it. Went back to eating like a normal person and got it back, plus a bit of interest. Tried the shakes. Tried the eight-hour eating window. Tried running five miles a day on seventeen hundred calories, which worked right up until the week I got the flu, missed six days of running, and somehow gained four pounds eating less than usual. I didn't understand that one for years.

So when I tell you this book isn't going to ask you to earn your dinner on a treadmill, it's because I already ran that experiment on myself and have the receipts.

Here's a statistic that gets quoted constantly in this industry, usually to make you feel hopeless: most people who lose a meaningful amount of weight gain a large share of it back within a few years. Diet culture likes to use that number to argue that dieting doesn't work, that your body has some kind of fixed set point it will always defend, that you may as well stop trying. I don't buy the fatalism, but I do think the number is telling us something real. If nearly everyone regains, the common factor probably isn't a few million individual failures of character. It's the method almost everyone was handed.

Think about whatever you tried last. Maybe it told you to cut carbs, or eat only between noon and eight, or drink the shakes, or earn your food with cardio the way I did. Maybe it even worked for a while — most of these plans do, at first, because most of them are quietly just getting you to eat less without saying so directly. Then a work trip happens, or a bad month, or the flu, and the whole rigid structure collapses because it was never built to survive an ordinary life with ordinary interruptions in it. You didn't fail the diet. The diet was built in a way that made failure close to inevitable.

What follows is the version I'd have wanted handed to me a decade ago. Fewer rules than you're probably used to, and the ones that remain are the ones I could never find a way around, no matter how many times I tried to cheat the math. You won't find a forbidden-foods list in here. Nobody's going to tell you a bagel is poison or that you need to give up beer forever. I'd rather tell you what's actually true, even when it's less exciting than what's on the cover of the next fad book.

A word on who this is for. I wrote it for the person who's lost and regained the same fifteen or thirty or fifty pounds more than once and is tired of the cycle. For the person without two hours a day to give a gym. For anyone who wants to actually understand what they're doing instead of just following orders from an app. If you're after a thirty-day transformation or a promise that you'll look like a different person by summer, that's not this book, and there's no shortage of people happy to sell you that story.

How this book works

Read it in order if you can — each part leans on the one before. But if you're the type who wants to start today and read the reasoning later, here's the short version, and you can come back to the relevant chapter whenever you want the "why" behind it.

Fat loss happens when you take in less energy than you burn, sustained over weeks. Nearly everything else in this book is a tactic in service of that single fact, either helping you create the gap or helping you tolerate living inside it. Protein and strength training protect your muscle while the number on the scale drops, so what you lose is mostly fat and the body underneath looks and feels the way you actually wanted. Sleep, daily movement, and a kitchen set up to help you rather than tempt you make the whole project easier than raw discipline ever manages on its own. And maintenance, the piece that actually separates the people who keep the weight off from the people who don't, is a skill you build through practice, not a finish line you cross once and forget.

That's the shape of the whole argument. Everything else is detail, and detail is where most people get lost, so we'll take our time with it.

One request before you start: read all of Part One before changing anything about how you eat. I know the meal plans in Part Five look tempting to flip to first. They'll make a lot more sense once you understand where the numbers behind them come from, and I'd rather hand you the tools to build your own plan than just hand you mine.



Part One — The Foundations

Chapter 1: Calories, honestly

Let's start with a word that's been turned into either a villain or a punchline, and deserves to be neither. A calorie is a unit of energy. The calories in a food are roughly how much energy your body can pull out of it. The calories you burn are how much energy you spend staying alive and moving through your day. Fat is stored energy — you gain it when you take in more than you use, and you lose it when you use more than you take in. Researchers have measured this directly, in metabolic wards where every gram of food eaten and every breath exhaled gets tracked. It holds up. Few things in nutrition science are this settled.

A lot of clever, confident people have spent the last fifteen years telling you otherwise. Maybe you've heard it's really about insulin, or about hormones, or about which specific foods you eat rather than how much energy is in them. There's a real thread of truth buried in each of those claims, and we'll get to it. But the headline version, that you can lose fat while eating more energy than you burn as long as you pick the right foods, doesn't hold, and the people selling that idea usually have a program attached. Hormones absolutely shape how hungry you feel and how your body chooses to store or release energy. That's real and worth understanding. It just doesn't repeal the fact that energy has to come from somewhere and go somewhere.

So why does calorie counting have such a rough reputation? Partly because plenty of people have done it in a miserable, obsessive way and burned out on it. Partly because the numbers on a food label and the numbers on a treadmill display are both a little wrong, which sends people chasing a precision that was never on offer to begin with. And partly because "eat less energy than you burn" is legitimately hard to execute day after day, which means anyone selling a shortcut around it will always find customers. The physics is simple. Living inside it is not. Most of this book is about the living-inside-it part.

What actually determines how much you burn

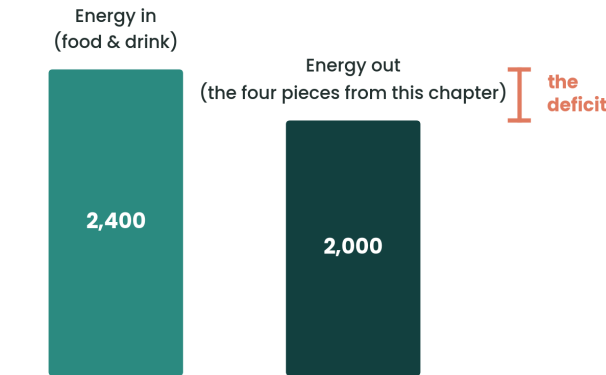
Daily energy expenditure usually gets split into four pieces, and knowing them tells you where your actual leverage sits.

The largest piece, somewhere between sixty and seventy percent for most people, is your resting metabolic rate: what you'd burn lying in bed all day, keeping your heart beating, your brain running, your organs doing their jobs, your temperature steady. This scales mostly with body size, and specifically with how much lean mass you're carrying. A bigger body costs more to run, which is also part of why weight loss slows as you go. A smaller body simply costs less.

The second piece is the energy spent digesting and processing what you eat, sometimes called the thermic effect of food. It runs around ten percent of intake, with one useful wrinkle: protein costs far more to process than carbs or fat do. Your body spends roughly a quarter of the calories in protein just handling it. Eat more protein, and a slightly larger slice of what you consume gets burned off in the accounting before it ever reaches storage. Modest effect, but real, and free — one of several reasons protein keeps showing up in this book.

The third piece is deliberate exercise: the run, the lifting session, the spin class. For most people who aren't athletes, this slice is smaller than they'd guess, often just ten to fifteen percent of the total, and it's the one we tend to overestimate by a wide margin. An hour of moderate exercise might burn three or four hundred calories, roughly one large sandwich. "I'll just work it off later" rarely pans out for this reason: the workout is real, but it's smaller than most people's appetite.

The fourth piece is the one almost nobody talks about, and it might be the most useful. It's called NEAT, short for non-exercise activity thermogenesis, and it covers everything you do that isn't sleeping, eating, or formal exercise: walking to your car, fidgeting at your desk, taking the stairs, cooking dinner, pacing during a phone call, carrying groceries up from the lot. Across a full day it adds up, and it varies enormously between people, sometimes by several hundred calories. More importantly for our purposes, it moves on its own in response to dieting. Eat less, and your body quietly turns NEAT down to conserve energy: you sit more, gesture less, take the elevator without ever deciding to. You won't notice it happening in the moment. We'll come back to this one, because managing it on purpose is one of the highest-leverage moves available to you.



Fat loss lives in the gap between the two bars above, held open week after week.

The numbers are fuzzy, and that's fine

Here's something the calorie-tracking apps won't advertise. The number on a food label is legally allowed to be off by a real margin, and it's an average to begin with, since your specific apple isn't identical to whatever reference apple got measured. How much energy you personally absorb from a given food depends on cooking method, fiber content, and even the mix of bacteria living in your gut. On the burn side, the calorie readout on a cardio machine is closer to an optimistic guess than a measurement — often overstating by a third or more.

If that makes calorie counting sound pointless, hang on, because it's the opposite. The move is to stop treating these numbers as gospel and start treating them as a consistent ruler. Log your food the same way every day, using the same imperfect database, and even though any single day's total might be off by a couple hundred calories in absolute terms, that error stays roughly constant from one day to the next. What you're actually tracking is the trend, not the truth. When the way you eat shows up as, say, seventeen hundred calories on your app, and your weight drifts down steadily over three weeks, you've learned something true and specific to your body — something no formula could have handed you in advance. The absolute number was fuzzy. The relationship it revealed was solid.

Carry that mindset through the rest of this book. You're running an experiment on one person — you — and what matters is what your body actually does, not what an equation