

MAN VS. DIET

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Inside a weight management program exclusively for men, Jay Teitel discovers that its members are tackling more than just the number on the scale

IT'S SUPER BOWL SUNDAY WHEN

I visit the weekly Sunday morning meeting at the Harvey Brooker 20/20 Weight Loss Program for Men in an industrial strip mall in north Toronto, and the atmosphere is tinged with indignation and vigilance. The object of dread? Chicken wings. "All you hear about today is these stupid chicken wings," says Helen Brooker, Harvey's diminutive pretty wife, a lawyer and Brooker's partner in the program. "It's like this every year. Super Bowl parties are such a bad temptation for most of the guys here." The guys in question are currently thronging the reception area, which sports a coffee counter manned by volunteers and three walls of before and after side-view weight loss photos of the members. Interspersed among the snapshots are inspirational quotes, a passion of Brooker's ("If you could do it alone," goes the most well-known, "you would have done it already"). To the left, a windowed wall looks onto the meeting room proper, where Brooker delivers his weekly Power Hour addresses. Straight ahead is the office where he does his private counselling sessions and where each client is weighed in camera every week.

Meanwhile, if I've come to see exclusively fat guys, I'm out of luck. This is because in Brooker's system, which places as heavy an emphasis on maintaining weight loss as weight loss itself, clients are encouraged to keep attending meetings even after they hit their target weights. (As an added incentive, they can keep coming back for free, provided they stay within five pounds of that target). At least a third of the crowd at every meeting is "maintaining." The result is a mixed bag of a scene, the same kind of schmoozing, war story-swapping atmosphere you might find in a Y locker room or the lobby of a synagogue after service. Speaking of synagogues, there are a few orthodox Jewish men in the crowd, dressed in traditional orthodox garb. There are also a couple of Toronto personalities I immediately recognize. This is a trend with the Brooker program: Robert Fulford, 81, a columnist and social commentator who has written about Brooker for *The Walrus*, is a client (50 pounds lost, another 140 pounds by his son, James); and John Tory, former leader of the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party and now chair of CivicAction (40 pounds). There are other local celebrity clients who have asked Brooker to keep their names from the media and plenty of non-celebrities who have no compunction about identifying themselves.

One of these is Vito, a vigorous 68-year-old with a full head of hair and a bracing air of certainty. "It took me nine months here to lose 74 pounds, and I've been maintaining my weight since July 2011. I went to Italy last year with my family and I didn't gain an ounce. My son gained 10 pounds in 14 days from all the pasta." Vito found out about Brooker from a radio ad. "I had a friend, a few years older than me. He had sugar problems and didn't take care of it. I went to see him one day, and he'd had his left foot taken off. A bit later, they amputated it above the knee. Now, he's in a home. That helped me decide." Had Vito tried other programs before, I ask him? "Sure, I tried other ones. They were all junk. They were based on starvation – 600

calories a day at some of them. So I'd lose 50 pounds and gain 80 back. With Harvey, it's simple. You learn how to eat the right things and never to let yourself get hungry. And you have lots of support because we all suffer from the same thing. I truly believe I have this conquered now."

Vito isn't alone. There's Syd, for instance, an 84-year-old retired furrier who lost 80 pounds in 14 months and has been at the same weight for three years. There's Ted Axler, 64, a family doctor (the clinic, counterintuitively, counts several physicians as members) who lost more than 100 pounds, and has also maintained his weight for three years.

IN 1971, the year Harvey Brooker lost his weight (the year "you lose your weight" has an epochal heft in the Brooker model), he was 27 years old, five feet six inches tall and weighed 215 pounds. A picture on the jacket of his book *It's Different for Men* shows a fat, unrecognizable Brooker holding his infant son. At the time, Brooker was in pharmaceutical sales, but his experience in dropping some 50 pounds with *Weight Watchers* was transformative. He decided he wanted to help other people lose weight and if possible make a living at it. He bought a franchise from a Boston-based company called *The Diet Workshop* and mostly struggled to make ends meet for the next three decades.

In 1985, struck by how ill-suited his and other programs were to deal with weight-plagued men – women were the overwhelming clientele at the time – he started doing a separate men's weight-loss class. It sputtered as well until a feature article appeared in the *Toronto Sun*. The article started a small groundswell of public awareness; by the early 2000s, his enrolment had climbed to more than 70. At that point, he started spending a lot of money on commercial radio advertising, which finally put the clinic over the hump.

Where Brooker's approach deviates from the norm is entirely a function of its target audience – men. Men, he says, differ from women in their weight-loss particulars, in everything from the more dangerous location of their gained weight (around their abdomens as opposed to hips and legs for women) and the "manly" foods they're conditioned to crave (steak and potatoes instead of rice and fish) to their belief that they can lose weight by just going to the gym. "Modern living," he writes in his book, "has created a perfect storm for men: a dramatic decrease in physical activity, pre-packaged foods that contain tasty but nutrition-less ingredients and ... the [lingering] myth that men are emotionally tough and have no feelings." That men do have feelings is obvious, he says, from the box of Kleenex on his desk in the room where he does his private counselling sessions. "A man who loses control of his weight generally ends up loathing himself and feeling that he is losing his reason for living," he says. "Men don't cry publicly, but I've had hundreds of tears in my office as they work their way through this unfortunate situation."

SKEPTICISM COULD – and possibly should – creep in here. Brooker has none of the qualifications you'd normally associate with a weight-loss expert. He isn't a dietitian or a nutritionist, a medical doctor or a psychologist. By vocation, he's an inspirational speaker, an Elmer Gantry of weight-loss, with the same nearbiblical sense of mission, though less New Testament and more Mosaic. This isn't to say that his approach lacks creditable science; the science he does use is the theoretical underpinning of *Weight Watchers*, the iconic program

founded in 1961 by the queen of all diet lay people, an overweight Queens, N.Y., resident named Jean Nidetch. Anyone who followed the exploits of the newly hefty Betty Draper on the AMC series *Mad Men* last season has had a chance to see the method in its original female-oriented manifestation: the eschewing of empty calories, regular meals with smaller portions and weekly meetings for mutual support (the Brooker method but with skirts and smoking). Brooker has repackaged these precepts – which were validated, resoundingly, in a 2010 study done by Dr. Susan Jebb of Britain’s Medical Research Council – as the 20/20 Method, including the allowable food list, the recording of things eaten and the reading of labels. The Prime Directives of the Brooker method state that your food should be nutritious, portable and leave you feeling satisfied and never hungry. (Going without food even briefly signals your body that you’re entering a famine and all calories must be stored. The result is yo-yo dieting – short periods of weight loss followed by more weight gain.) Brooker also warns people off any diet that won’t let you eat normal grocery store-bought food.

But for Brooker, the science, like everything else, is inextricable from the mission. He regards the general future with vigorous optimism and the weight-complicated future with an optimism tempered by a steely, immutable condition. A chronically overweight man, he says, has three options: 1. Buy a farm and work it yourself. 2. Gain weight. 3. Follow the Brooker method.

“Harvey’s a great motivational speaker,” says Ted Axler, the GP who lost more than 100 pounds. “I’ve always felt as though he was talking directly to me.” Brooker’s six-month Total Support Program, including an introductory workshop open to members’ spouses/partners for understanding the philosophy to provide additional support, is \$1,975. “It might sound high,” he says, “but at [at other well-known doctor programs], they pay \$500 a month and, for that, they’re eating 800 calories a day [Brooker’s plan allows 1,500 to 2,000]. My fees are such that it prevents people from coming if they’re just shoppers.”

IT ALSO ASSURES that a significant percentage of his clientele will be above the age of 50 (something very unusual in other female-dominated programs). At least half of the program’s members these days are in this demographic, extending all the way to the oldest active member, an 86-year-old oncologist named Harold Maizel who, since losing 25 pounds two years ago, has maintained his weight and also maintained his “five o’clock drink.” (“Someone once said,” Maizel told me after the meeting, “that when you’re on this diet, you don’t live longer. It just seems like you do.”) It’s the mature man, says Brooker, who’s more ready to surrender to the method and more able to pay the fare.

The members have moved from the reception area now and settled into their seats in the meeting room, with the overflow still watching through the window. The Power Hour begins with a warm-up from Mitchell Oelbaum, 50 (50 pounds lost), another former client who now works for the clinic proper. Oelbaum starts by asking if anyone intends to go to a Super Bowl party today and, if so, have they planned their menu? One member volunteers that he’s going to be the celery and carrot stick provider, and Oelbaum salutes his resolve. “You can be the guy who brings the vegetable platter,” he says. “If you’re the only one who eats it, so much the better.”

Then he introduces Brooker to healthy applause, and Brooker launches into his motivational talk. Whether eliciting testimonials from the members or riffing off the cuff, he is plainspoken and

bluntly powerful. For Brooker, food for these men is an addiction, one they'll never be completely cured of and that they'll need ample support to simply keep it at bay. "You need to stay away from those toxic people who say you don't have to stay on this program forever and who will try to rag on you for doing this beautiful thing for your life," he says. "They'll say, 'You going to your meeting, your fat class, on Sunday morning? It's like a cult there.'" The crowd laughs, but Brooker is unapologetic. "And I agree because the first four letters of culture are cult, and this is a new culture for you, a new way of thinking." If it seems draconian, you think, for his Don't Eat (Ever) list to include sugar, chocolate, cakes, cookies, pies, ice cream, chocolate bars, chips of any kind, pizza with cheese and, yes, chicken wings, it's instructive to note that he has delivered more than 1,450 exhortative addresses like this one, helping thousands of men in the process (a figure he provides frankly himself). Several of these men regularly drive 100 kilometres each way to attend his sessions; one man from Washington, D.C., who was too far away to commute, recruited Brooker to coach him over the phone.

Why this near-religious allegiance? It's simple: if every Harvey Brooker client harbours an inner skeptic, they also harbour something larger: an inner fat guy.