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Dr. Susan's Girls-Only Weight Loss Guide

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For the
Girls

Been There, Done That!

Separating Feelings from Food

I know exactly how you feel. You really hate how you look and you're staring at yourself in the mirror saying you'd like to change your body or change your feelings about your body. You're praying for the willpower to do it and you don't have a clue where to start. Or maybe, your mom gave you this book because she's fed up with arguing about food, your weight or exercise. Maybe you're furious and hurt that she won't just accept you for who you are. But deep down you know that she wants you to be happy, and she can't figure out how to help you. I've been there, right where you are now. I've stood in front of that mirror. And I've cried.

When I was fifteen years old, I gave up competitive figure skating. I decided that spending hours in a cold skating rink wasn't nearly as much fun as hanging out with my friends. It was a great decision, really, because I wasn't that talented at skating. And besides, it freed up a lot of time to concentrate on schoolwork (hang out with my friends), work part-time (check out the great-looking stock boy), and pick up a new

hobby (eating!). That's right, when I stopped skating, a lot of my down-time became focused on activities that centered around food (watching soap operas and socializing). What's more, I didn't replace skating with any other exercise, unless you'd call walking around the mall and munching on caramel popcorn exercise. Since I had skated about fifteen hours a week and was now down to about . . . let's call it zero hours, I bet you can imagine what happened. I began to gain weight! No shock there, right? Except that while I was going through it I didn't even realize it was happening.

You see, when you gain a pound at a time you can tell yourself that it's not happening, or that it's temporary, or pretend that it doesn't bother you. But the truth was that by the time I was sixteen I hated the way I looked, especially when I compared myself to my friends. And there was also no denying the fact that guys weren't interested in me.

I pretended that I didn't care, or that I wasn't "ready" to date yet. But I'll admit to you now that I spent many nights crying myself to sleep. To make matters worse, my mom couldn't take it. She spoke to me often about losing weight and eating differently. Now, as an adult and also a mom myself, I realize she was trying her best to help me be happy, but at the time it didn't seem like it. I was always conscious about what I ate and how much, especially in front of my mom and my friends. I was sure that they were watching everything I ate. I began to eat secretly once in a while to avoid that guilty feeling that I always had when I ate in public. Of course, that just made me feel even more guilty—especially when I overate junk food by myself in my room. Another thing that really got to me was when my mom would try and help me find clothes that "flattered my figure." There weren't any! Of course, some things looked better on me than others, but since I wasn't happy with my body, I didn't feel good in clothes, and my mom and I would end up having huge, blow-out fights. She tried to support me, but since I knew she wasn't really happy with my weight, I wasn't interested in her support. I also wasn't thrilled with the constant reminder that I didn't like myself!

When I went to college, it got even worse because there was so much food in the dorms and the cafeteria. I'd always heard that you gain

weight in college. Now I knew why! What's more, as I continued to gain weight, I gave up even more control over my eating because it all seemed so hopeless. That meant that I ate even more food, more often, without even trying to eat healthily. But somewhere, in my third year of college, when I was about twenty, a good friend gave me a surprising response to my usual complaints about dieting and hating my body. She suggested that I'd never be able to lose weight or even feel comfortable with my body, if I didn't first feel good about myself. I had always thought it was the opposite—that if I were happy with my body, I'd like myself better. Besides, even if she was right, it wouldn't be easy to do because I'd been feeling bad about myself for so long. So, I must admit that for about a year I ignored what my friend had said.

But at some point during my senior year I began to think about it again. My life was full and, in many ways, satisfying—I had friends, I was doing okay in school, and I was looking forward to working on my career. I remember looking at myself in the mirror one day, and saying, “I am doing fine, so why do I keep eating and why do I let myself look like this?” And standing right there in my dorm room, I had a crazy revelation: Although I had started gaining weight when I stopped skating, I'd *continued* to gain because I used the taste of food to make me feel good whenever I felt down and to feel even better when I already felt good. But, unfortunately, if, like me, you eat every time you have a strong (positive or negative) feeling, you're bound to gain weight. In fact, all along, I was trading a lifetime of liking my body and myself, for a few moments of happiness in tasting the food. My friend had been right all along—if I felt good about myself, or at least dealt with my emotions better, I wouldn't need to eat all the time.

I started to write a food and feelings journal—noting all the food I ate and how I felt when I ate it. It became obvious to me that I ate for many reasons that had nothing to do with hunger, such as sadness, excitement, anger, and anxiety. Writing this journal not only helped me become aware of this, but helped me to stop doing it. Making this change wasn't nearly as difficult as I thought it would be (when you get to Chapter 4, I'll teach you how to do it, too). As I began to pay attention to my feelings, rather than just eating them away, I was able to deal with

them better. For instance, if a friend upset me, I'd discuss it with her, rather than eat a box of cookies. The more in control I felt, the more I liked myself—wow, that was amazing!

As I started to feel better about myself as well as stronger and more determined, I decided to work on improving my body. I began to pay attention to my eating and exercise habits and I began to feel a strong desire to feel good about my body. Sometimes it was a bit difficult because making healthy choices isn't always easy. At other times it was simple—but either way, it was definitely worth it. When I became healthy, I realized that in order to maintain it, I'd have to keep working at it. Now as an adult, I still work at it—eating in a healthy way, exercising, all of it! Oh, and in case you're wondering, my mom and I are now best friends.

Looking back on my teen years, I realize that if I'd had the knowledge and tools, I could've started even sooner on the track to feeling good about my body and making choices that would have made me not only healthier, but happier. In fact, in some ways it was just a lucky accident that my friend made me think about it and that I had that incredible revelation connecting eating and feelings. What if I hadn't made that connection? I might still be miserable today.

Then, when I became a psychologist, I started working with lots of girls and young women. I found out that many have exactly the same worries about their bodies and their weight that I had. I also found out that many had the same reasons for eating that I had—to stuff down feelings. I also found out that girls overeat for other reasons too. For example, some of these girls come from families that overeat, eat poorly, or don't exercise. Others gain weight because they go on and off diets, and still others are overweight because they have inherited the genes for weight gain from someone in their family—just like eye or hair color. By teaching girls how to separate feelings from food and showing them how to break unhealthy patterns and understand their bodies better, I have been able to help many girls become healthier and happier. And as I helped these girls I began to realize that there are many more girls out there who I wanted to reach and help. I wanted to give them the hope, encouragement, and the skills they need to find

motivation and inner strength to handle the pressures they are feeling from all sides: family, friends, the media, the fashion world, and the food industry. *That's why I've written this book*—to show you the way to a healthier, happier you! I know the problems, from personal experience and from years of professional training and work with hundreds of girls. I also know the solutions—the very ones I'm giving you in the following pages. In *Dr. Susan's Girls-Only Weight Loss Guide*, I will talk about all these things and many more. I will help you address all the issues that concern you so that you, too, can begin on the journey to becoming healthier and happier.

You have my word—this book is for you. Throughout the chapters, you'll see many examples of girls who have had exactly the same struggles as you. What's more, I've discussed every page of it with girls ranging in age from twelve to nineteen. In fact, to ensure that this book will really help girls, I formed a **Girls Advisory Group**. It was made up of twelve awesome, amazing girls from 12 to 18 years old, representing a range of ethnic groups, shapes, and sizes (you can see their names on the Acknowledgments page, and at the end of the book they share their feelings and thoughts). They've read and critiqued every word I wrote. They were tough on me, but they are also a part of the reason you will love this book—they poured their hearts into it in order to help other girls feel better and live healthier.

The issues, feelings, pressures, and problems will be familiar to you. You will hear from many girls just like yourself, battling with the same things with which you struggle every day. The suggestions and solutions will work with your lifestyle, and are designed especially for girls. You have a right to feel good about your body and yourself. You also have a right to information and knowledge that will give you the *power* to make intelligent changes so you can become healthier and feel happier with your body. Most importantly, you deserve the right to have *control in your own life*. But control comes from making smart, educated choices—that's *real power*. You've come to the right place to help you figure out how to make these things happen healthily and successfully! So start now—begin to read. You can start at the beginning of the book, but if you'd rather jump to the part about exercise, or the part

about eating, or the part about families, go right ahead. Just take your first step—it can be a big step or a tiny step. You can read a page or a chapter. As long as you do something to help yourself, you will start to **FEEL** better! Let's begin.

