I gained weight for about six months when I stepped on the scale on Nov. 5, 2005. I wanted to see how far I had come since June, when I started going for two-mile walks three times a week to lose a few pounds. Even before stepping on the scale, I feared the efforts were for naught. Despite six months of exercise, my shirts weren’t any looser. I still bristled at the notion of climbing staircases. The walks weren’t getting easier.

My worst fears were confirmed when I saw that I had gained 20 pounds since my last weigh-in. I was a 23-year-old nearing 400 pounds. I didn’t see an opportunity to improve. I saw months of wasted efforts. I saw XXXXL T-shirts. I saw years of junk food coming back to haunt me.

MATT WASTRADOWSKI

cheeseburgers and milk-shakes wasn’t an option. I was too scared of 400 pounds for that. I knew that healthful living would mean I had to make sweeping changes.

I knew I had to change my diet and exercise. I knew I’d have to get help from friends and family. I also knew I’d need to change my attitude.

I needed a positive outlook and the strength to maintain focus through the difficult times.

The combination of changes I made paid off. After one year, I had lost 90 pounds. Two years later, I have lost 110 pounds and, more importantly, kept all of it off. Here’s what I learned that made the difference.

1. Be willing to change.

Beyond the basics — exercise is good, it wasn’t enough to say what I wouldn’t do. I also had to be proactive and put thought into what I was going to do. The exercises I did had to be fun and the food I ate had to be enjoyable. If not, I knew I’d lose inter-

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Run your personal marathon one step at a time

Setting goals can help you take off the pounds

Staying motivated and setting appropriate goals along the way are two of the cornerstones of achieving and maintaining weight loss. I checked in with two local experts to get their tips on how to do both.

Shannan Fasold, 38, is an instructor and Clark College counselor who teaches courses on goal-setting. Cassie Walling, 26, is an expert by experience. She developed an interest in running to stay motivated to maintain a 70-pound weight loss and has her sights set on a completing a marathon in 2008.

Shannan Fasold: on goal-setting

The fundamentals of goal setting are the same whether the end game is achieving better grades, earning a raise at work or getting fit, Fasold said. Here are her five tips for developing a game plan.

1. Be specific. Don’t set a general goal such as to “get healthy in 2008.” Instead, Fasold advises breaking down the result you want to achieve into small, tangible steps that can be measured. Fasold says that seeing success in increments keeps motivation high.

2. Ask why. Getting a handle on why you want to achieve the goal and the benefits of reaching it will help you maintain focus. If necessary, re-evaluate goals periodically to ensure you’re setting the right ones. Priorities change over time, motivation comes in waves and as Fasold says, “Life kind of throws us curveballs.” When your life situation changes, your goals might need to be adjusted.

3. Stay positive. Fasold says it’s important to consider the dialogue you have with yourself as you work to attain a goal. Work to ensure that what you tell yourself is positive and will help you achieve your objective. Saying something such as, “I don’t want to fail,” places importance on simply not failing. Instead, your attitude should be framed as, “I’ll do my best, and I know I’m not perfect.” Piggling out or missing a workout once in awhile doesn’t mean total failure. Fasold says that it’s better to think, “Tomorrow’s a new day” when that happens.

4. Don’t set goals for anyone else. Fasold says the most successful goals are set because

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est and give up. Instead of begrudgingly eating a salad, I thought about what to add — cheese, fruits or a homemade dressing.

As the exercise and new food choices were integrated into my routine, they became less alien. Once that routine was established, exercising became as much a part of the day as going to work or brushing my teeth.

2. Build a support system.

My parents provided cooking tips. A few friends joined me at the gym. Some shared recipes. Everyone offered encouragement, advice and support.

Involving that group in my process created a sense of accountability — and, I’ll admit, guilt — that still keeps me on track. I would rather tell friends about shedding more pounds, instead of a shameful junk food binge.

Even better, they didn’t give up on me when I inevitably stumbled.

And stumbling always happens. The key is to remember that, when it happens, it’s okay to admit it and move on. Having a support system makes that process much easier.

3. Seek out ways to maintain motivation.

Remaining motivated after a few months becomes a chore. What was once new and different becomes routine. It’s natural.

So, I had a difficult time remaining energized, especially when the results weren’t obvious.

When I wasn’t excited about exercising, I devised games to make workouts fun and entertaining.

Some days, it was challenging myself to burn more calories than the day before. Other times, I thought about how much more I could do without the extra weight, such as hiking in the Columbia River Gorge.

And I wouldn’t have lasted a week if it wasn’t for my iPod. Bill Conti’s “Gonna Fly Now,” the “Rocky” theme song, never fails to motivate.

I learned to take heart in the subtle differences, especially since it takes time for the changes to add up. Six months in, I could walk up stairs and play basketball for extended stretches without becoming winded.

Two months after that, I was wearing XXL shirts, instead of size XXXL.

Ten months and 75 pounds after I started, a co-worker asked if I was losing weight. It was the first time I’d been asked that. Every small sign of progress inspired me to keep going.

4. Have the right mindset

I cringe when I hear the term “going on a diet.” Living healthfully is a lifestyle, not a process that starts or stops whenever convenient. It’s too easy to go on and off diets.

Diets breed the notion that goals need to be attained. People often ask how much weight I’m trying to lose, but I’ve never thought about it that way.

If I wanted to lose 150 pounds, was I failure for only losing 110? Or, was I successful for losing that much when it was just an arbitrary number?

Weight loss and living healthfully is a change that continues with every meal choice and trip to the gym.

In my case, the changes were about undoing years of poor choices.

It doesn’t require perfection.

Every time I question that credo, I think back to the night before I weighed myself in November 2005.

Back then, I wasn’t seeing or feeling the desired results of my walks. A second chin had appeared in September. I was trying, but I was focused on the wrong things and on what wasn’t happening.

At every turn, my mother offered ideas, and I shot them down.

She suggested I cut out the snacks. “I can’t,” I said.

She told me to work out more often. “I can’t.”

But two years, two shirt sizes, 110 pounds and hundreds of miles on the elliptical machine later, now I know I can.

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...people want to achieve them, instead of setting the goals at the behest of others.

5. Reward yourself. Think about the rewards that come with living healthier or losing weight, such as dropping a shirt size or two. Other times, a reward might be internal, such as knowing how good it will feel to walk up stairs without becoming winded. Fasold says that by focusing on rewards, people are more likely to remain motivated.

Cassie Walling: on staying motivated

When Walling made the decision to choose a healthier lifestyle, the Vancouver resident didn’t just give up former habits such as eating junk food. Instead, she filled her life with a new passion running.

Cassie Walling Has lost 70 pounds

By focusing on something new in her life, Walling maintained her motivation to make better choices.

Since December 2006, Walling has been a regular at five kilometer runs, and in August she took part in the Portland to Coast Walk. In the process, she’s lost 70 pounds and counting. She’s now studying to become a fitness trainer. Here are Walling’s suggestions for staying motivated.

1. Deal with it emotionally.

“Being overweight isn’t just a physical thing,” Walling said. When Walling is tempted by junk food, she asks herself why she wants to eat it and if it’s worth the extra time on the treadmill.

2. Try something new. Walling said that yoga helped her break up her workout routine. She also hired a personal trainer.

3. Moderation is key. Walling still splurges but is more careful about her overall intake. Instead of ordering a large drink with whipped cream or other additions at a coffee shop, she orders a small or medium of the same drink.

— MATT WASTRADOWSKI