

Two Years to a New, Radiant Life

Chef AJ and friends propel this mom of eight to a 72-pound weight loss.

Susanna Hall

I had a carefree childhood, and was an athletic teen and active young adult. But between my husband's cancer diagnosis in the early part of our marriage and subsequently giving birth to eight children while losing seven babies to miscarriage, I was sent into a 25-year spiral of obesity.

I grew up eating a SAD, standard American diet, and the highlight of my week was whether we would buy Frosted Flakes or Cap'n Crunch at the grocery store. I recall putting a whole tablespoon of white sugar on my Rice Krispies and eating Jell-O powder straight out of the box. As a busy teen, I enjoyed a can of Chef Boyardee Beefaroni or a frozen TV dinner as a quick and easy meal. I loved baking desserts and could easily eat half a bowl of cookie dough before I even baked the cookies. I realized recently that I spent my whole life high on sugar, because I had never experienced the calm, stable brain that I now, at age 56, enjoy following a 72-pound weight loss.

Just one year after graduating university and one year into my marriage, my husband was diagnosed with testicular cancer. We were able to begin our family soon after he recovered, and I shelved my half-completed master's degree in education to concentrate on motherhood.

During my first pregnancy, I gained fifty pounds, and I had two more babies in four years. Yo-yo dieting became my constant, irritating companion over the next quarter-century. After these three babies, my husband decided to train for a marathon. Not to be left behind, I dieted and also started running. I was able to lose my excess weight and completed my first 10k race at seven weeks pregnant with my fourth child in 1997. That was the last time I saw my ideal weight. In the ensuing

years, I went on to have another four babies and seven miscarriages. The resulting rollercoaster of emotions and the incredibly busy times forced me to put myself last. The pounds continued to pile on.

I learned to bake to help cut costs during those lean financial years. I looked for cheap food options like grinding my own flour and made all of my own bread and baked goods. Those foods filled my kids' tummies—and, unfortunately, mine too. I tried Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Body for Life. I knew I was obese and getting bigger but was unable to achieve success with any of these programs. I was left feeling hungry and depressed, gaining back more than I lost. In desperation, I joined a gym and worked out with a private trainer for three hours a week. In two years, I lost five pounds. I still didn't know that it was the food causing my obesity.

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In February 2015, tired and overweight, I fell off a sidewalk into a low garden. As my body twisted to the ground, I heard my ankle pop. I sustained three avulsion fractures, which tore the ligaments off my ankle bone and had to be surgically reattached. Only six months later, I developed a bulging disc in my neck which required a surgically implanted artificial disc. I was prescribed



Percocet and hydromorphone to cope with the pain. Days before the surgery, I was informed that they would not be able to go forward with the disc replacement because my BMI of 33 was too high. I burst into tears. Besides being completely humiliated, the thought of continuing on in pain and on drugs was devastating. I crash-dieted on Paleo and quickly dropped the ten pounds that were needed to bring my BMI into range.

At this point, I felt that I was forever going to be a "big girl." My physical and emotional well-being continued to deteriorate, and I resigned myself to wearing 2XL tops and tight size-18 pants. I was being left behind by my active family of one girl and seven boys, spending mornings sleeping in till 9:00 a.m. or later and afternoons napping on the couch. Obesity is exhausting. It was a vicious cycle, and I had no information or tools to break free from my food addiction. I comforted myself by baking desserts every day ("for the kids") and eating with reckless abandon. Sunday morning waffles slathered in butter and syrup, grilled ham and cheese sandwiches on homemade bread for lunch, a trip to the candy store in the afternoon, and a fat-laden casserole for dinner were the norm. I topped out at 258.8 pounds at 5'11" tall. With my BMI now sitting at 36.6, I was ripe for a change.



The same month the COVID-19 pandemic began, my husband had a routine doctor's appointment. His slowly deteriorating blood lipid panel indicated it was time for him to go on statins. We both felt desperate and that there had to be another way. We dug up our old *Forks Over Knives* DVD and started following their website for recipes. I started reading books by Drs. Caldwell Esselstyn, John McDougall, and T. Colin Campbell. I used this time to learn a new way of cooking and experimented with many plant-based recipes. I was able to drop fifteen pounds in my first year on a sloppy plant-based diet with loads of sugar, flour, and oil.

In February of 2021, I serendipitously found Chef AJ's Truth About Weight Loss Summit, and that was where everything began to turn around for me. I became a student during that nine-day summit and took copious notes. I dove into Chef AJ's book, *The Secrets to Ultimate Weight Loss*, and used that as my guidebook.

I took every single course that Chef AJ offered (and still do!), and in the process I learned that this is the optimum diet for human health and longevity. I have almost returned to a healthy BMI (25 and dropping) and have about seven pounds left to lose to get back to my ideal weight of 178 pounds,

which I haven't enjoyed in over 25 years. Following a whole-food, plant-exclusive diet, I am never hungry and never without an incredible variety of food to eat and enjoy. I've learned to batch cook and always have things like potatoes, rice, oats, and sweet potatoes cooked and ready to use in my fridge. I regularly pull together a quick meal of salad greens, beans, and a grain topped with a delicious, seasoned balsamic vinegar.

My brain fog is gone, and the joy in life has returned. I can spend two whole days out at my kids' sports tournaments or walk and cycle trails for two hours without tiring. Even after a long and busy day, I still have energy left for meal preparation and evening activities with my family.

Shopping has become pleasurable again. I was recently delighted to buy size-8 jeans and medium tops. At first during my weight loss, I continued to head straight for the plus-sized sections in stores. Since then, I have shopped at places I wouldn't have dared set foot in before, like Lululemon and American Eagle!

I wake by 7:00 a.m. without an alarm. I never nap during the day anymore. I fall asleep and stay asleep and have been able to get off caffeine, alcohol, and melatonin. I thought the e-bike that I purchased early in my weight loss journey was for my physical health, but it has turned out to be so much more. I've ridden over 6,200 kilometers in 2½ years. Being outside in nature has done wonders for my mental health, and I now crave the outdoors! My vision has improved at every optometrist visit in the last three years, my blood lipids and A1C are normal, and my blood pressure sits at a healthy 102/64.

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Armed with the knowledge I have gleaned from Chef AJ and all the fascinating guests on her YouTube channel and in her courses, I have gained control over my obesity and am



loving life in my slender, healthy body. I have more energy now at 56 than I ever had in the last thirty years and feel more like the young, fresh-faced university graduate I was in 1988!

Drs. Lisle and Goldhamer have helped me immeasurably through their book, *The Pleasure Trap*. I learned that being obese was not my fault. They helped me understand that it was the unnatural, hyperpalatable, processed foods of my childhood that overstimulated my brain and caused me to become addicted to these chemicals. It's been an amazing process to see my past addictions to sugar and flour start to fade into the distance. I now experience food freedom. I don't have to make decisions about whether or not to eat things that aren't compliant because they have no place in my health-promoting diet. Abstinence truly is bliss!

In February 2023, I had the thrill of being interviewed by Chef AJ on The Truth About Weight Loss Summit—the same summit that I had eagerly watched just two years prior. I have called this my full-circle moment! I also enjoy being a co-moderator on her daily YouTube show, and it brings me so much joy interacting with others in the chat.

It was through these daily shows that I was introduced to the National Health Association and the important work that has been done here in the last 75 years. It's been thrilling to read the past issues of the magazine online, especially way past! I love learning about the history of the natural hygiene movement and am fascinated to think that this information has been around for so long, yet I am just learning about it now.

I hope and pray that I have caught this in time and don't experience any of the chronic conditions that I see in my family of origin, including obesity, diabetes, neuropathy, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol. It is my greatest desire to age well and not be a burden to my children, who are now aged 16 to 31. I am excited to see what the second 50 years of life bring—I plan on being an active, vibrant, and healthy centenarian someday! 🌱