



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

dead weight

“**D**ead weight.” Even the words have an unpleasant sound, to say nothing of the images they bring to mind. I have found those words coming to me repeatedly as I have considered the environmental and psychological connotations of shedding pounds. I think all of us, even the physically slim and fit often have other kinds of excess weight—a surplus of things that encumber rather than delight us or psychological burdens that dampen our zest for life.

Many of us need to lose weight. The recent movie “*Supersize Me*” is a glaring and unpleasant reminder of the fattening up of America. Everything is bigger: us, our serving sizes, our houses, our cars; and most of all, perhaps: our expectations. Even though we know that happiness comes from within and that the key to happiness is in caring for others, we can get sidetracked by the lure of advertising that promises happiness through a bigger house, new car, sexy clothes, make-up, perfume, etc. Only by stepping back occasionally to examine our lives, our decisions and our purchases, can we make sure that we are not falling into a materialistic quest for happiness. When upkeep of our possessions begins to be a burden, we have probably gone too far in the materialistic direction. As long as our lives are bringing us real joy, not just temporary highs, we are probably on the right track.

THE WEIGHT ON OUR MINDS

Psychological burdens are even more complex and can be even more difficult to unload. Many of us are saddled with an overactive conscience, which blames us for nearly everything that goes wrong around us. The guilt piles up for real or imagined failures and we feel worse and worse. For some, anxiety is a burden. Worrying about situations that we are unable to change can be almost paralyzing. Fear and worry drive out joy in a heartbeat. Finally, depression is often felt as a literal weight on our hearts, suffocating the life out of a person.

All of these burdens can be laid down, but it is often not easy. The first step is to accept our condition and to be willing to ask for physical, psychological, and even spiritual assistance. Physical help may come in the form of yoga, running, massage, or medication. I think the best psychological help involves at least five steps:

1. Expressing, clarifying, and understanding feelings and behavior;
2. Recognizing the origin of the feelings and the defenses we have developed for handling our problems;
3. Changing the way we think about problems and situations;
4. Developing confidence in our ability to face life’s challenges; and
5. Discovering activities that bring us joy and satisfaction.

Finally, spiritual help involves finding meaning in our lives, living our values and being of use.

Each of us has burdens we need to lay down, dead weight we may have been carrying for a long time. As we think about shedding pounds, let’s also think about letting go of material and psychological burdens that keep us from fully living, appreciating and enjoying our lives. **h&h**