

THE FAT GINGER NERD

A WEIGHT LOSS STORY

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SAMPLE

INTRODUCTION

If a man is offered a fact which goes against his instincts, he will scrutinise it closely, and unless the evidence is overwhelming, he will refuse to believe it. If, on the other hand, he is offered something which affords a reason for acting in accordance to his instincts, he will accept it even on the slenderest evidence. The origin of myths is explained in this way.

—Bertrand Russell, *Proposed Roads to Freedom*, 1918¹

1977 was a pretty big year.

Star Wars ruled cinemas everywhere, with honourable mentions to *Smokey and the Bandit*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *Saturday Night Fever*. In our homes, colour television was still relatively new to many of us, and on those TV screens we were enjoying the likes of *Happy Days*, *M*A*S*H*, *Charlie's Angels* and *The Six Million Dollar Man*.

In music, we were listening to such chart-topping artists as ABBA, AC/DC, the Bee Gees, Debby Boone, David Bowie, the Commodores, the Eagles, ELO, Fleetwood Mac, Foreigner, Billy Joel, Queen, Leo Sayer, Rod Stewart, Donna Summer, Wings and Stevie Wonder. It was also the year in which we lost the King, Elvis Presley.

In technology, the early rise of home computing was under way.

1977 was the year in which Apple Computer was incorporated by the two Steves, Jobs and Wozniak. The Commodore PET computer was first released, as was the Atari 2600 gaming console. On a larger scale, the space probes *Voyager 1* and *Voyager 2* were both launched, and the Space Shuttle *Enterprise*, named after the fictional *USS Enterprise* of *Star Trek* fame, also made its first flight in that year.

And in politics, Gerald Ford was formally succeeded as President of the United States by Jimmy Carter, following the results of the previous year's election. But less well known at the time was another political event that took place that year. An event that would set the tone for the future direction of the eating habits of not just the US, but of much of the Western world, for decades to come.

In February 1977 a US Senate select committee chaired by Senator George McGovern presented a report titled *Dietary Goals for the United States*.² Its recommendations included increasing carbohydrate consumption to account for 55% to 60% of energy intake, and reducing overall fat consumption to 30% of energy intake, with saturated fat accounting for 10% only. Dietary cholesterol, sugar and salt were also to be reduced.

These recommendations reflected the emerging wisdom of the time, that fat — particularly saturated fat, through its effects on cholesterol levels — was a primary contributor to heart disease. This viewpoint was not unanimous, with critics such as English physiology professor Dr John Yudkin favouring sugar as the more likely culprit, as per his 1972 book *Pure, White and Deadly*.³ However, the low-fat movement led by Dr Ancel Keys of the University of Minnesota, on the back of findings from his landmark 1970 Seven Countries study,⁴ was gaining the ascendancy.

That observational studies such as Seven Countries — whose power generally extends only to establishing possible correlations, but not actual proof at a causative level — were alone enough for the low-fat idea to gain any traction at all, bears some degree of curiosity on the part of historical observers. As science journalist Gary Taubes described the situation in his 2007 book *Good Calories, Bad Calories*: '*Dietary Goals* took a grab bag of ambiguous studies and speculation

... and then officially bestowed on one interpretation the aura of established fact.’⁵

Recognising the unsettled nature of the wider scientific debate at the time, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) president Dr Philip Handler challenged the very propriety of the report itself. ‘What right,’ he asked, ‘has the federal government to propose that the American people conduct a vast nutritional experiment, with themselves as subjects, on the strength of so very little evidence that it will do them any good?’⁶

Handler’s concerns were echoed by physician and nutritionist Dr Robert Olson of St Louis University, during an exchange with McGovern in July: ‘I pleaded in my report and will plead again orally here for more research on the problem before we make announcements to the American public.’⁷

McGovern’s mind, however, was already made up. ‘Senators don’t have the luxury that the research scientist does of waiting until every last shred of evidence is in,’ he countered.⁸

The select committee report would go on to form the basis for the United States’ official dietary guidelines first released in 1980,⁹ which in turn would lead to similar such guidelines being developed in other countries around the world over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, including New Zealand.¹⁰ To this day, the first source of evidence cited for New Zealand’s *Eating and Activity Guidelines* (EAGs) is the equivalent dietary guidelines of the United States.¹¹

In 1978, the year after that original report was first published, I was born. Thus, my entire life has been lived in the shadow of this prevailing sentiment that, among other things, animal fats are bad for us and that grains are good. And it is at the feet of that very sentiment to which I lay a great deal of the blame for many of the health problems that plagued my life over the years that followed.

I may not be a qualified health expert in the traditional sense. There is no special salutation or title preceding my name, nor do I have any set of fancy letters following it. But here I am all the same, alive and well. That may not sound like much, but once upon a time

not so long ago, the chances of that still being the case by now were, shall we say, small.

This would also not be the first field into which I have invested my time without being overly qualified to do so. I have worked in radio, but I never went to broadcasting school. I have taught, but I never went to teacher's college. I have worked in IT, but I don't have a computer science degree.

This book is not about my professional life, however. Perhaps the most remarkable part of that story has just been explained in the previous paragraph. No, this book is about my personal life. A life that, for so long, was a life less than ordinary. A life whose quality and direction was questioned by everyone around me, from family to classmates to teachers to medical professionals to work colleagues. Questions endless, answers few.

This book documents that personal journey of self-discovery. It is a story about how one fat ginger nerd finally fulfilled the simplest of dreams — to just be 'normal' — after half a lifetime of wishing and wondering how to make that possible: by turning his back on the very highest levels of advice that were supposed to have fixed him in the first place, but never did, and as he would later come to learn, never could.

* * *

I used to live next door to a family with an overweight teenage boy, who I would often see shut away in his bedroom as I would walk past on my way home from work. He would spend his afternoons there, playing video games on his big flat-screen TV. I felt terribly sorry for him, knowing exactly what it was like, having once been in the position that he was in now. It was almost like looking at myself from my own earlier years.

He probably believed that his solitary gaming habit was a major contributor to his condition. He possibly believed that he might already have been doing his best to stay healthy, and felt dejected at the prospect that what he was doing was simply not good enough,

that he himself was simply not good enough. Maybe you, the reader, possibly feel the same. I know I used to.

This book has been written for those kids of today, who are still like how I used to be. For the families of those kids, whose parents may rightly worry for their future. For the kids of yesteryear whose futures are now on the verge of a most uncomfortable arrival. And for those who despair at the wider situation that our society as a whole now faces: in the timespan of a single generation, the proportion of Kiwi adults with a weight problem has more than doubled, from 28% in 1993¹² to 66.2% in 2020.¹³

The rates of other associated conditions have also skyrocketed during the same period. Estimates of New Zealanders with type 2 diabetes have nearly tripled, from 2% of the population in 1993¹⁴ to 5.9% in 2020.¹⁵ High blood pressure rates have increased from 8% in 1993¹⁶ to 21.4% in 2020.¹⁷ Our nationwide prevalence of chronic metabolic disease has never been greater than it is now.

And in the meantime, many experts continue to claim that the science has long since been settled on these matters; the case closed, the door locked and the key thrown away. Instead, the blame for this collective health crisis lies squarely with the people, for not following their advice sufficiently closely. We all know what we need to be doing. Apparently, we just aren't doing it.

Those, in my opinion, are some pretty broad brush strokes. While it may very well be true for some of us, I certainly don't believe that it applies to us all. At least, not in my own experience. I know I tried my best. I did what I was told, for all the good it did me. Which wasn't much, to say the least.

I was fat long before it was cool, long before it had become normalised to the extent that it has today. The only time in my life that I could ever have been considered a trendsetter, not that I ever wanted to be.

Until, in the space of less than two years, I wasn't fat any more. And what's more, I've never gone back.

That's not something that many people are able to achieve. One study suggests that of those of us who somehow manage to lose as

much as 10% of our body weight, the percentage who then go on to maintain that loss for at least a year is around 20%, or one in five.¹⁸

I wonder how many people there are who have lost more than three times that amount and kept it off for more than five times as long? Probably very few. And yet, for all my lack of professional expertise, I'm somehow one of them.

In no way can I claim to have all of the answers for everyone, of course. I still don't even have all of the answers for myself. But I do seem to have accumulated enough answers for myself to have made a meaningful difference, to have finally been able to alter the course of my life towards something approaching normality for the first time. I can only hope that my own experience provides to others even a fraction of the benefit that it has ultimately provided me.

If I could invent a time machine for the purpose of sending just one thing back to my past, it would be this book. It's like a letter to my younger self, or to that boy who used to live next door. Had I known at that age what I know now, my life could have been so completely different that I cannot even begin to imagine how it might otherwise have turned out.

Time itself, of course, is relentless. It is that inexorable passage of time that gives each new day its own unique value. Every day is precious. Our very mortality gives us every reason to aspire to do what we can to make the best of the time that we each have, to seek to live our lives in as many healthy and meaningful ways as possible.

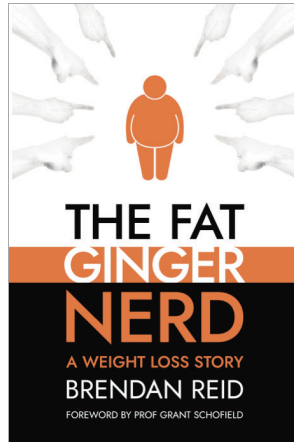
To work towards improving one's lifestyle patterns takes a very strong commitment to change, stronger than the force of old habits, a radical self-honesty and the ability and willingness to do the research with an open mind that allows one to question previously held beliefs.

May you have the courage to question yours.

Want to read more? The Fat Ginger Nerd is available February 2022.

Order online or ask your favourite bookseller.

<https://thefatgingernerd.com>.



***The Fat Ginger Nerd* is an inspiring personal story, woven with practical weight loss help and some startling insights into how we ended up with this public health crisis.**

During the 1980s and 1990s, a time when the world had already convinced itself that eating less and moving more was the simple solution to its burgeoning obesity epidemic, Brendan grew up having committed the cardinal sin of being fat.

Then in 2015, his health failing and with both time and options running out, one fateful encounter finally set in motion a personal journey of discovery that would see him achieve and maintain a healthy weight for the first time in his life.

Now, with our metabolic health in a worse state than ever, Brendan reflects on his own weight loss transformation and speaks out against the continuing one-size-fits-all dietary dogma that had previously condemned him to decades of unnecessary suffering.

Available February 2022 in paperback and ebook. Order online or ask your favourite bookseller. <https://thefatgingernerd.com>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brendan Reid is a former fat broadcaster turned fat software developer, currently based in Dunedin, New Zealand, now minus the fat.

After finally losing more than 50kg (111 pounds) in under two years, Brendan's original weight loss success story was featured on Diet Doctor in 2017, and since 2019 he has spoken of his experience at live events both at home and overseas.

Between ongoing work and video game habits, his book *The Fat Ginger Nerd* took around five years to write, and around forty years to live.



<https://thefatgingernerd.com>

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DISCLAIMER

This book is primarily a memoir. Events of the past, while intended to be portrayed accurately, have been written from the author's perspective; specific details, such as dialogue, may vary from the recollections of others.

The research presented is for informational purposes only, and is not intended as a substitute for personalised medical advice. Please consult with an appropriate health professional before attempting any lifestyle changes such as those discussed in this book, especially if currently taking medication.

NOTES

Introduction

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