

THE HEALTH ISSUE

I've Always Struggled With My Weight. Losing It Didn't Mean Winning.

A diet app helped me shed my extra Covid pounds — and reminded me that I'm still the same old me.

By Sam Anderson

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There were a few bad moments, over the course of a few bad months, that led me to download the weight-loss app. These will probably sound trivial to anyone who is not me, and of course they *are* trivial — but we are talking about bodies here, and about my body in particular, and one of the defining features of having a body is that it is a fire hose of tiny humiliations blasting you constantly in the face, never allowing you to look away, even when you most want to.

One bad moment happened in Los Angeles. I had flown out, during a lull in the pandemic, to visit my great friend Alan, a friend so close he is basically a reflection of my own soul — and as Alan and I wrapped each other in a big hug of ecstatic reunion, he suddenly reached down to my waist and playfully pinched my love handles, probed them in the way a fishmonger might assess a large hunk of priceless tuna, and he said: “What happened here? Did you eat my friend Sam?” I chuckled, but in a complicated key.

Like many Americans, I put on serious weight during the pandemic. How much? No idea. It had been years since I'd stepped on a scale. We were suffering a worldwide supertrauma, and my approach to calamities has always been extremely simple: I snack. Do you know the saying “Don't fill up on chips?” That saying is about me. I am the guy who fills up on chips. During the pandemic, I snacked the way other people knit or whittled or shuffled cards: anxiously, obsessively, to keep my spirit from hissing out of my ear. I turned myself into my own personal foie gras goose, guzzling chips, chocolate, chocolate chips, peanut butter, peanut butter chocolate chips, chocolate peanut butter ice cream sprinkled with peanut butter chocolate chips. And so, bulge by bulge, lump by lump, my body grew all the infamous mounds and blobs our culture likes to invent insulting nicknames for: a muffin top, moobs and — most especially — love handles. As an inner-circle friend, Alan had every right to make that little joke; I probably would have said the same to him. Still, it lodged in my mind, and sometimes, late at night, it clicked on like a broken flashlight.

Another bad body moment happened in Cape Cod, during a supposedly fun beach vacation, when I discovered that none of my shorts would fit. I had packed many pairs, but all their waistbands were suddenly like wristbands — and so I had to leave my family and go walking downtown wearing shorts so tight I couldn't even button them, through crowds of sculpted, shirtless Provincetown men showing off their beach bodies. Finally, after a long sad time in a dressing room, I came out wearing a pair of huge black cutoff jean shorts that I did not even like.

But this was when things took a turn. The man at the counter, a slim Cape Cod fashion plate with tanned arms popping out of his tank top, looked me over gravely, lowered his voice and confided something amazing.

“You know,” he said, “that’s exactly where I was six months ago.”

“Really?!” I said.

I felt as if I had stepped into a weight-loss commercial, and I was unable to stop myself from saying the next line in the script.

“What did you do?”

“Dude, I’ll be honest with you,” the shopkeeper said — and still, all these months later, I find it touching that he addressed me as “dude.” It was, in a vulnerable moment, an unexpected little charge of tender masculine care. He hated to admit it, he said, but what enabled him to lose all his pandemic weight was a weight-loss app. It sucks, he told me, but in his experience it was the only way: You have to log your meals and count your calories until everything is back under control.

In the weeks after this conversation, walking around in my black jean shorts, I suffered some more bad moments — until eventually, with mixed feelings, I broke down and took the Provincetown shopkeeper’s advice. I poked around on my phone and downloaded a weight-loss app called Noom. It seemed to be suddenly ubiquitous online, popping up in tweets and banner ads and in a random testimonial from someone I followed on Instagram. I felt silly about it, so at first I didn’t tell anyone. Yes, I found it humiliating to be overweight, but I also found it humiliating to be worried about being overweight. I wanted to lose the weight but didn’t want to be *seen* wanting to lose the weight, even by myself.

You can tell what Noom is like from its name — one syllable of cutesy app-babble that seems to suggest real language (“new me?”) without actually meaning anything. Noom is to diet culture what a cool youth pastor is to organized religion — a kind of “good vibes” modulation of something that might otherwise put people off. The core of Noom’s personality is that it is always trying very, very, very hard. Sometimes my phone will flash, and I’ll think I have a text or a news alert, but it will just be Noom saying something like, “We’re blinded by your 51st meal in a row glow up 🌟,” or, “Batter up (but hold the batter 🍪). It’s time to log Dinner.” Every morning, Noom gives me little quizzes about nutrition and water intake and caloric density, and whenever I guess right, it says corny words like “Noomalicious!” and then rewards me for my achievements with NoomCoins that move a piece on a game board as if I were a child playing Candy Land.

I am a middle-aged man with a mortgage and teenage children and a beard. I have arthritis in my ankles. Please excuse me for a moment while I schedule my next colonoscopy. Do I really need to spend a large part of every day being treated like a preschooler with a sticker chart?

Well, humiliatingly, yes, I do. I seem to need this very badly. Because the psychological hardware that governs my in-the-moment relationship to food is apparently 5 years old. In fact, this might be why Noom worked for me — not despite its annoying cutesy tone but because of it. That candy-colored, cartoonish frequency allowed it to reach the tiny child in me, the tiny chubby child who first struggled with his weight.

Almost right away, the app got me to do two simple things that turned out to be radical acts: to weigh in every morning and to track everything I put in my mouth. That was basically the whole program: pay attention to what you eat, make conscious decisions, stick to a rough calorie budget, note your progress and

keep doing all that until the good behavior becomes habitual. I didn't want to enter "50 handfuls of gorp" into my food log, so I would leave the lid on the gorp tub and — if I actually felt hungry, not just bored or worried — I would eat an apple instead.

"Wait, are you calorie-restricting?" my wife asked me, one morning, as she watched me counting almonds.

"Hold on," my teenage daughter said, "are you logging everything you eat and weighing yourself every day? I don't like that!"

I admitted that yes, I was doing those things, and that I didn't particularly like it, either — it was not my first or second or hundredth choice. But I disliked the alternative more: eating when I wasn't hungry, eating until I felt almost sick, mindlessly inhaling whatever heaps of processed food the multinational snack conglomerates managed to stick in front of my face all day long. And I had no idea how to break those deep habits on my own. There seemed to be dangers on all sides. I didn't want to inject myself with the well-documented toxicity of diet culture — obsessive restriction — but I also didn't want to abandon myself to out-of-control excess. It seemed like a very small needle to thread.

For whatever reason, shockingly, depressingly, triumphantly, problematically, Noom worked. In my first week, I lost three and a half pounds. Within two weeks, I'd lost seven. Within a couple of months, I had lost all my pandemic weight and more. And the weight kept coming off, enough to unlock vast wardrobes of old clothing: pants I hadn't worn in years, favorite T-shirts I had given to my daughter. My wife asked if I maybe secretly had cancer — but I didn't, as far as anyone could tell. "All of that weight was just from SNACKING?" she said. "All these years, all you needed to do was PAY ATTENTION?"

My weight has somehow managed to make itself a central fact of my life, an essential part of the story I tell myself about myself.

Suddenly, I was slim. It was, by any measure, an incredible weight-loss success story. Even my great friend Alan texted about how good I looked. ("Did I say that?" he wrote, with a facepalm emoji, when I reminded him of the time he squeezed my love handles. "Sam, I was very inappropriate. But I still think it's funny.") I had achieved the great transformation — I had turned myself into the "AFTER" photo.

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And now that we have that out of the way, I can tell you what I consider the most interesting thing about my weight-loss journey, a secret that you will never see in any banner ad. As the months passed, as I stuck with my healthful habits and got used to my new trim body, as the line on my Noom weight graph stayed low, I

felt something amazing: I felt pretty much exactly as I had always felt my whole entire life. I was, after all that change, still only myself. My big epiphany, if I could put it into words, would be something like: “So what?”

What is the human relationship to the body? Is it like a roommate? A pet? A twin? A teammate? A rival? A parasite? A host? Is the body our essential self, or is it just an outer shell — and if so, is it more like a clam shell (homegrown, enduring) or a hermit crab shell (adopted, temporary)? Is it closer to a tamale husk or a hot dog bun or a pita pocket or the fluorescent cake-tube that wraps a Twinkie’s sweet cream center? Is the body the other side of the coin of the mind, or is the body the whole coin itself, and is the mind just the series of images and slogans stamped, superficially, on the exterior? Is the body an ancient piece of hardware designed to run the cutting-edge software of our souls? Or is it more like a hostage situation — is the body a time bomb strapped to our existence, the thing that will bring the action movie of our life to a sudden, unpredictable end?

Well, I don’t know. None of us do. This is one of the gnawing weirdnesses of being human. It is impossible to think your body; you can only really *body* your body. And so we walk around with this feeling of mild alienation, this basic incoherence — a dualism that runs all the way down to the roots of Western culture. You can find it in Plato (“if we would have true knowledge of anything we must be quit of the body”) and in the Bible (“What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?”). Or to quote the comedian John Mulaney: “I don’t know what my body is for, other than just taking my head from room to room.”

What I know about my body, for sure, is its size: when it is bigger or smaller, squishier or firmer. I know this every day, firsthand, from point-blank range. I should acknowledge here that I’ve been lucky: I’ve never struggled with an eating disorder, have never been grievously hurt by diet culture. (Noom, by the way, tries to position itself as “above” diet culture — but it absolutely is not, as many critics have pointed out.) Even so, my weight has somehow managed to make itself a central fact of my life, an essential part of the story I tell myself about myself. In our number-obsessed culture, people tend to use “weight” as diagnostic shorthand for the whole vexed mind-body relationship. It serves as a kind of stock price: a number that indicates, publicly, the overall health of our private situations.

For much of my childhood, I was the fat kid. “Husky” was a word I heard a lot. As a chubby child, I remember staring at photos of my mother as a chubby child. Her big round cheeks were my big round cheeks; we looked as if we were both peeking out, shyly, over a pair of ripe mangos. This was both a comfort and a curse, to see my own face reflected across the decades, to know that my mom had been there first, to recognize my body as an intergenerational mirror. I understood that I was just a sequence of genes, activated and expanding, filling in the generous outlines of my ancestors.

As a kid with a big soft body, I suffered all the usual troubles. I was the slowest possible runner; I dreaded taking my shirt off at public pools. Sometimes other kids laughed at me. I felt like a loser, because I feared that the largeness of my body would relegate me to a sad small corner of the culture. Movies and TV were clear on this point: The Fat Kid could be a funny sidekick but not the main character. The best he could hope for was, at some point, to transform: to find a way to shed the extra weight and unleash his essential self.

My mom had it harder. Her father was a tough guy, a slim cattle rancher who galloped through life correcting everything that struck him as wrong. Many things struck him as wrong. Once, infamously, he watched me drink a whole glass of apple juice and then told me, very seriously, that I had done it improperly. “You drank it for the flavor,” he said. “Not the nutrition.”

That is a ridiculous thing to say, obviously, but I should also admit that he was correct. I was absolutely drinking that juice for the flavor. I was surrendering myself completely, unreasonably, to the pleasure of consumption. And why not? This is the great subversive joy of a snack: It is meaningless eating, eating purely for eating's sake, eating detached from nutrition and even, in the end, from appetite itself.

I was, back then, a legendary snacker — a little monster of appetite. In the school cafeteria, I was famous several tables over for stuffing my mouth with brownies. It was a whole high-wire act: Kids would donate their desserts and watch them disappear, all at once, into my face, and my cheeks would swell hamster-style until I could barely breathe, and everyone would point and laugh while I chewed and swallowed for many minutes. I loved the attention, of course, but my deeper motivation was really just that I wanted to eat all those brownies, and — crucially — I wanted to eat them all at once.

I remember thinking about these issues, philosophically, in the mornings as I walked to school. When faced with the last half of a Snickers bar, I mused, was it better to eat it in multiple bites, moderately, savoring each morsel, drawing out the pleasure? Or was it better, theoretically speaking, to inhale the whole thing in one gooey choking mouthful, cheeks heaving, batching every remaining flavor molecule into a giant extinction burst, a moment of total sensory overload? I decided firmly, without question, that my soul was a “one bite” soul.

Still, I did not like being fat. Throughout my childhood, as I watched my mother gain and lose weight, as I tagged along to her weight-loss meetings and Jazzercise classes, I became fluent in the slogans of 1980s diet culture. No pain, no gain. A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips. Inside every fat person, there is a skinny person waiting to get out.

I remember standing in the shower, in sixth grade, feeling disgusted by my body — grabbing a handful of my floppy belly and saying to myself, “This is not who I really am.” I was reciting, unconsciously, the cultural script. And so, at 12, I summoned my willpower and started jogging. By the end of middle school, I was fairly slim. By high school, I was a decent athlete. In retrospect, I think what really slimmed me down were hormones and growth spurts. But that achievement became a pillar of my teenage identity, a story I loved to tell about myself: I had been a fat kid, a kid living under a genetic curse — but then, through the miracle of willpower and self-discipline, I overcame.

Or did I actually overcome? What diet stories tend to leave out is that, in the wake of restriction, people almost always gain the weight back. The story of a life is much longer than the story of a diet. Over the decades, my weight has fluctuated widely as I have pinged between poles of excess and restriction, appetite and control, abstinence and snacking. Or, as my grandfather might put it, flavor and nutrition.

I have an alter ego that my wife calls, with affectionate amazement, Fat Sam. She first met him on our honeymoon. We had been driving all day, rolling through the high desert near Santa Fe, watching huge thunderstorms flickering over black mesas, trying to get to where we were going — and when we finally did, in the middle of the night, famished and exhausted, the only open restaurant was Denny's. And the only thing on my mind was merging, body and soul, with the first cheeseburger that passed by.

The moment my meal arrived, the universe seemed to crack in half, like an eggshell in the hands of a line cook — and a brand-new character crawled out: Fat Sam. Fat Sam attacked the food in front of him with wild urgency. As I ate, my wife kept trying to say something, to start a conversation, but I would be in the middle of chewing, or near the end of chewing, or just at the beginning of chewing, and I would hold up one finger as if to say, Yes, hang on, just a second, I have an answer for you — but then in the moment of swallowing, when my mouth was briefly clear, when I could have spoken, I would immediately shove the

cheeseburger back into my mouth and take another bite. I was in a kind of trance. I was like a horn player doing circular breathing. At one point the waitress came over and said, "How is everything?" and with my mouth absolutely overflowing, sounding like a drunken man, moaning with almost sexual ecstasy, I shouted, "Oh, it's REALLY REALLY good!" — and everyone in the room realized at the same time that she had not even been talking to us but to the table behind us. Fat Sam didn't care. He just kept cramming the universe into his face.

This sudden lumpy palimpsest — the absence of his body, the presence of mine — hit me, in that moment, as outrageous and weird and sad and embarrassing and funny.

The classic diet slogan that made such an impression on me as a chubby child — "Inside every fat person, there is a skinny person waiting to get out" — should, in my case, be reversed. No matter what my body happens to look like at any particular moment, Fat Sam lives inside me. I recognize now, in fact, that Fat Sam represents some of my best qualities: curiosity, cheerful appetite, a hunger for life, satisfaction in the moment. Fat Sam's mission is to consume the world in giant gulps of joy. It doesn't even have to be food: It can be naps, or video games, or telling jokes at a party, or walking, or shooting free throws, or reading, or petting a dog. Whatever satisfies a need, whatever I am starving for. And in that transfer, in that passage from outside to inside, in that radical taking in, there is a validation of existence, a proof of being, that I refuse to reject. Fat Sam, in many ways, is precious and good. He is a funnel into which the universe pours, the pinch in the hourglass. He reminds me that all of life is, in a sense, appetite. Even restriction satisfies a hunger — the hunger to restrict. When I chose to deny myself something, it is Fat Sam who is feeding, greedily, on that denial.

One of my favorite photos is a selfie I took 10 days after my father died. It holds a strange paradoxical energy: mourning and joy, comedy and sorrow, ending and continuing. I took it in the guest bathroom at my father's house when, going through his old things, we discovered a treasure trove of vintage jogging shirts. My dad was an avid runner — he moved to the jogging hotbed Eugene, Ore., during its golden age in the 1970s, when the local shoe company, Nike, was rising and the legend Steve Prefontaine was out running the streets with his famous mustache. My father had a mustache like Pre's, and he ran those same streets. Year by year, he amassed a huge collection of T-shirts from Eugene's annual race, the Butte to Butte. Looking through them felt like time travel: wild colors, outdated designs, fonts morphing to keep up with the styles of various decades.

The shirt I loved most was from 1982. My father would have run this race when I was 4, in preschool, still learning to tie my shoes, just forming my first permanent memories. Nearly 40 years later, I held this T-shirt and thought of my dad wearing it, still in his 20s, running up and down the Oregon hills, passing through the raggedy shade of Douglas fir trees. It was yellow and green, my favorite color scheme, a funky 1970s moss-mustard. I could not resist trying it on.

The tag said medium, a size I could sometimes get away with wearing. But not, it turned out, this medium. Not my father's 1982 medium running shirt. The shirt gave hilariously powerful evidence of something I already knew: that my father's body and my body were two very different things. His vintage shirt was comically small, designed for a running junkie with single-digit body fat, and on me it looked like a water balloon stuffed with potatoes. What struck me as really funny was that I was not even, at the time, in bad shape — sort of B-minus territory, by my standards. So this sudden lumpy palimpsest — the absence of my dad's body, the presence of mine — hit me, in that moment, as outrageous and weird and sad and embarrassing and funny, all of which I think you can read on my face in the photo. I imagined my father laughing at me, affectionately — at his big, goofy adult son — and I then imagined his laughter fading into a shy smile, as it always did. I imagined him remembering 1982, when that shirt would have been bright and new, when his son's body would have been much too small to fill it.



Trying on his father's size-medium T-shirt from 1982, shortly after his father's death in 2019.

I had been thinking, in those days, a lot about bodies. At the end of his life, my father was very ill. I thought about the way my able body had allowed me to help his suddenly disabled body with its basic functions, just as he helped me with those same functions 40 years before. He could hardly swallow, in the end, and he had been so skinny, and I felt so close to him. Life can be so sad. I thought a lot, of course, about the terrible fact that my father's body was now in the ground, that his body was an object, and that my body, too, would someday be only an object. The crisis of my father's body made me think, in a new way, about the basic crisis of every human body: that we will always, in the end, be disabled, lose control. In many ways, this is what our bodies are: ever-present reminders of our essential lack of control. The body subjects us to gravity and pain. It makes us eat, sleep, fall, sit. It is the only part of us that can be bitten by a dog or go tumbling down a flight of stairs. Much of diet culture is a sublimated response to this crisis — an attempt to discipline the unruliness of the body, to transcend it, to prove that we are not, in the end, merely things. Diet culture is a fear of death disguised as transformation. But the transformation is a fantasy. If, through some heroic act of will, you do manage to heave yourself into a new place, it is still you who did the heaving. It is you who stands in the new place. You will still be you.

And I will still be Fat Sam. I will also be the person who is embarrassed by Fat Sam. My feelings about my body form a chord of many notes, not all of which sound good together. I am, all at once, the one who wants to swallow the world and the one responsible for stopping myself from swallowing the world. This probably means that I will always be unsatisfied, in some way, until the moment that everything ends. And I will have to learn to be satisfied with this.

For now, every morning, I wake up and try to direct Fat Sam within certain reasonable boundaries. I make him a large bowl of Greek yogurt with green grapes and chopped fruits and 10 almonds. He eats it ravenously, with hilarious joy. Together, Fat Sam and I think about that yogurt for the rest of the day, and we go to bed still thinking about it, excited to head down to the kitchen and eat it all again.

Sam Anderson is a staff writer for the magazine. He has previously written about the last two northern white rhinos on earth, Kevin Durant and the Brooklyn Nets and the artist Laurie Anderson.

Audio produced by Adrienne Hurst.

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