Ask the Diet Program Coordinator: Why Give Yourself Credit?

**Question:** I don't really understand the notion of "giving yourself credit" when it comes to dieting. Why is it so important? And do you have any suggestions for someone like me who is really terrible at giving herself credit most of the time?

**Answer:** Giving yourself credit means acknowledging every time you do a positive diet or exercise-related behavior. Typically dieters give themselves credit by telling themselves something like, "Good job." "That was great," or "I really deserve credit for that." This skill is one of the most important components of our program. Giving yourself credit, day after day, will help raise your dieting confidence. The more you recognize the things you do well, the more you'll build your sense of self-efficacy, simply because you'll have proof that you can do it. And, like many things in life, once you have more confidence in your ability to stick to your dieting consistently, the easier it will become.

Imagine that you're going to a party at your friend's house. You know she's a very good cook and there's going to be lots of delicious food. If, before you go, you say to yourself, "This is going to be really hard. I don't know how I'm going to stay in control and not overeat. I'm really worried," you might go to the party and have a hard time staying in control. By contrast, if you say to yourself, "Okay, this might be more difficult than my usual dinner but I know I can do it- I've followed my plan on similar occasions and I've felt great, so this should be no different," you're likely to have an easier time staying in control. In both scenarios, the situation is the same, but what you say to yourself, and your confidence level, are different. The only way to raise your dieting confidence is by consciously proving to yourself that you can stick to your plan.

Another important aspect of giving yourself credit is keeping mistakes in perspective. Let's say it's 4:00pm and you go to the break room at work. You see that your co-worker brought in cookies and you end up eating one. You might say to yourself, "Oh, it's so terrible that I've just eaten that. Today is such a failure, I might as well just continue eating off track and start again tomorrow." But, if you've been giving yourself credit all throughout the day and you're aware that you've already engaged in many positive dieting behaviors, such as eating sitting down, reading your Advantages List and Response Cards, following an eating schedule, and eating slowly and mindfully, it will be much easier to say to yourself, "Okay, I made this one mistake but, I've already done 20 other positive things today. The scales are still clearly tipped in the favor of things I've done well. I need to just get back on track right now and I'll be fine."

If you only notice your faults and slip-ups, it makes sense that any one mistake would feel like a catastrophe (or a reason to give up for the day) because it's the only aspect of your experience that you're focusing on. Giving yourself credit helps you to notice the things you're doing well. And it helps you realize that, in any given day, you're probably engaging in many more helpful than unhelpful behaviors.

Have I convinced you yet that giving yourself credit is important? Let's discuss how you can get yourself to use this crucial technique throughout the day, every day. Many dieters that we've worked with over the years initially had difficulty giving themselves credit. In fact, most of them were masters of the opposite: They would focus primarily on the one or two mistakes they made in a day and lose sight of the positive things they did. Many had never even considered giving themselves credit when they did something well. Instead, they were in the habit of ignoring their positive behaviors and lambasting themselves when they made a mistake. But like everything else in our program, giving yourself credit is a skill. The more dieters practice this skill, the better they get at it.

One of the biggest hurdles in successful weight loss are unhelpful thoughts, especially those that contain the word "should." "I don't deserve credit for this because I should have already been doing it." "I'm not giving myself credit because this should already be easy." "I shouldn't give myself credit until I reach my goal." These sabotaging thoughts are not true! We tell dieters in no uncertain terms: No, you shouldn't already be doing these things because you never knew how to get yourself to do them before. And no, they shouldn't already be easy for you. If losing weight or maintaining weight was easy, then no one would be overweight and everyone who has lost weight on a diet would be able to keep it off. But that's
simply not the case! It's critical to give yourself credit now, in the moment, and not wait until you achieve your goal. Doing so is counter-productive. To get to your goal in the first place, you need to master the skill of giving yourself credit, raising your confidence, and proving to yourself that you can do what needs to be done. Then you'll get there.

Another common hurdle is remembering to give yourself credit. In our sessions, we ask dieters about their positive dieting experiences. Our follow-up question is, "Did you give yourself credit for that?" The most common response (initially) is, "No, I guess I forgot to." Here are some strategies that you can use to remember to give yourself credit:

1. Wear a reminder. Our dieters may put on a bracelet they don't normally wear, place a rubber band around their wrists, or put their watch on the opposite wrist. Every time they notice this unusual cue, they ask themselves, "What have I done in the past few minutes/hours that I deserve credit for?"

2. Write it down. We ask dieters to write down at least three things, every night, that they did that day for which they deserve credit. It's important to make sure that you write down "big" things (like staying in control at a party, resisting a craving, etc.) as well as "small" things (like reading your Advantages List, eating something sitting down or slowly and mindfully, etc.) so that you build an awareness of everything you're doing. Remember: The small things are just as important as the big things, because mastering them is what enables you to move forward and tackle harder dieting skills.

3. Make and read credit-related Response Cards. Especially if you're someone who is good at only focusing on mistakes (and has credit-interfering beliefs), it's very important to make credit Response Cards such as the following:

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I deserve credit for every positive dieting behavior because dieting is not easy and no one ever taught me all the skills that are needed to do it successfully.
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It's important to give myself credit for every positive diet and exercise-related behavior I do. Doing so will help raise my confidence and will make dieting easier.
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And every time you read the cards, give yourself credit for having done so.

4. Set a "credit" alarm on your phone to chime several times throughout the day. Every time it chimes, think of a positive dieting behavior that merits giving yourself credit.
I hope that this will be helpful in both convincing you that you do deserve credit and in getting yourself to actually do it. As I said in the beginning, giving yourself credit is a critical skill in long term weight loss and maintenance, and it can't be overlooked. Good luck!