Mind over weighty matters

Focusing on food helped dietitian find healthy size

By [Susan Schwartz](#)
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BERWICK — A brewery serving pizza and fried cheese curds might not be the site you'd expect for a launch party celebrating a dietitian's new book on her successful battle against obesity.

But the recipe that helped Julia Grocki shed about 130 pounds and keep it off includes beer, pizza, and all other foods.

"I don't live in a world where food is good or bad anymore," said Grocki, who once weighed about 350 pounds. "You can eat anything. You just need to eat smaller portions and really pay attention to it."

Grocki, a state-licensed dietitian, is marking the release of her self-published memoir, "What You're Looking for is Not in the Fridge," with a party at Berwick Brewing Co. from 1 to 3 p.m. Nov. 5.

She has other unorthodox techniques.

She doesn't weigh herself.

"Every time I weighed myself, if I lost weight, I'd reward myself and give myself a treat," she said. "If I gained weight, I'd think I screwed up anyway and might as well eat."

She doesn't count calories, either.

"You just need to pay attention to when you're hungry, when you need fuel," she said.

Long battle
Her wisdom was hard-won over decades, she said.

Grocki, 39, said she was always chubby. By fifth grade, she was so disturbed by her weight, she was exercising on Nordic Track, and starting a decades-long cycle of not eating, then eating too much. Her weight fluctuated wildly, she said. By the time she was a sophomore at Scranton High School, she weighed 282 pounds.

She was so humiliated when she was the only one in her class unable to run a mile, she said, she took up running. When members of the boys cross country team saw her determinedly jogging down a road, they adopted her, inviting her to train with them.

She lost 100 pounds, and continued running through college. The exercise kept her weight down, she said.

But then she came down with mononucleosis her senior year. She didn't have the energy to run, or even study. Her grades tanked, and she gained 40 to 50 pounds.

Eating disorder
Her health problems worsened after she enrolled as graduate chemistry student at the University of Virginia. In 2003, she was diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome, which gave her high testosterone, resulting in facial hair, acne and other problems.

She kept a journal, with the intention of writing a book about the condition.

But as she read back over it, she realized she was writing mostly about food and how much she disliked her body.

That's when she realized she might have an eating disorder.

A counselor at the college suggested she read books by Geneen Roth about emotional eating.

It was a revelation. Grocki went back to school to become a dietitian, and she became her own first patient.

Mind over matter
Her first step was to change her negative thoughts, she said.

She used to tell herself she was fat, stupid, ugly and lazy, especially when she stepped on the scale — something she did five times a day or more.

So she started consciously stopping those negative thoughts, instead reminding herself of her accomplishments.

She also stopped weighing herself.

"As soon as I stopped weighing myself, I felt better about myself," she said.

She swore off diets, and instead began practicing mindful eating — eating only when she was actually hungry, and taking smaller portions and savoring them rather than stuffing herself.

"Mindfulness is about picking foods that make your body feel good," she said. Overeating doesn't make you feel well, she said. So instead of eating a dozen hot wings, she said, she stops after three or four, secure in the knowledge that she'll enjoy the remaining wings even more if she eats them when she's hungry.

She found she tended to crave healthy food as she needed it.

"If you offer me a pear or chocolate, sometimes I'll pick the pear, not because I think that's healthier, but it's what I want," she said.

Moving ahead
Her resolve was put to the test when her grandmother died in 2007. As she struggled to visit her grandmother in the hospital, continue her studies, and balance a troubled marriage, she gained five or 10 pounds, she said.

"When life hits you hard, all the healthy dominos start to fall over," she said.

But she noticed she was starting to feel run down, she said. So she caught herself.

"I'd think, 'What can I do tomorrow to be better,'" she said. That might be a day out with friends, an extra trip to the gym, or more sleep, she said.

Soon, she was back on track.

She'll never be petite, she said. But today, she's healthy and strong.

This year, she finished both the Scranton Half Marathon and the Ber-Vaughn Pool triathlon.

And she now owns her own private practice, "New Beginnings Nutritional Counseling here, in addition to working as a dietitian at Bloomsburg University's student health center.

"It takes a lot of practice," she said. "But nothing feels better than giving the body what it needs."

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