

The homework I was given after meeting for the first time with Jill Sherman Skeem, a certified macrobiotic health counselor who teaches health and cooking classes and runs a private counseling practice in Twin Falls, included:

- Sitting down to eat without reading, watching television or other such activities.
- Taking at least 20 minutes to eat a meal, chewing food well, putting my fork down and placing my hands in my lap in between mouthfuls, and not mixing foods in the same mouthful.
- Avoiding water and other beverages while eating.
- Staying vertical, always keeping at least one foot on the floor and not eating for at least three hours before going to bed.
- Rising early and going to sleep before midnight.
- Setting meal times at regular intervals.
- Giving myself daily body rubs with hot, damp towels.
- Walking for 30 minutes each day.
- Wearing cotton clothing next to my skin.
- Avoiding electric cooking – especially cooking in a microwave.

By Chris Steinbach
The Times-News

TWIN FALLS -- I wake up every morning and face what is known in the newspaper business as a trend story. And that's before I've read the *Times-News*, the newspaper where I have worked for the past 19 months.

If you do a Google search for the word "obesity," you will find nearly 80 million Web sites on the Internet. One of those sites, www.obesity.org, which is owned by the American Obesity Association, says:

* About 127 million American adults are overweight, that 60 million are obese and nine million are severely obese.

* The definition of being overweight is to have a Body Mass Index of at least 25. The index is a way of measuring excess weight that also takes into consideration your height and frame size.

* The definition of being obese is a BMI of 30 or more; 40 or more for severe obesity.

All of this has been published before many times in the *Times-News* and newspapers nationwide. But I don't need to read the stories. I see the numbers in the mirror every morning. My BMI is in the high 30s.

In Idaho, the Centers for Disease Control says one in five of us was obese in 2001, the last year for which numbers are available. In 1991, it was 11.7 percent. This is a growing team on which no one wants to play.

I see my fellow teammates every day -- at the gym, the grocery store and at work, my favorite corner bar, the doctor's office and the restaurant where I will most likely eat lunch today. Like many others, I have tried numerous diets – some which have helped; most which did not. At my heaviest, about three years ago, I weighed nearly 360 pounds. The lightest I have weighed as an adult – nearly 20 years ago, was 210 pounds. These days, I fluctuate between 290 to 300 pounds

So why am I sharing this?

Well, lifestyle changes are clearly needed. My hope is that Jill Sherman Skeem will help me with a challenge I have been unable to overcome on my own. And the added pressure of sharing this struggle with 50,000 newspaper readers and thousands more who are reading this at www.magicvalley.com might be the motivation I need, too.

Skeem is a certified macrobiotic health counselor who graduated from the Strengthening Health Institute in Philadelphia. She teaches health and cooking classes, runs a private counseling practice, and has contributed to a successful series of stories in the *Times-News* that we have called Eat Cheap. She and Features Editor Virginia Hutchins had been kicking around ideas for new ways to write about healthy eating and living. They thought it would a good idea for someone on our staff to work with Skeem and then write about it in the *Times-News*.

That's where I got involved. Skeem and I have met once, and we will meet every other week or so for the next two to three months. I'll be writing periodic stories about the experience.

Since our first meeting, I've learned that the Strengthening Health Institute was founded in 1997 to teach others how to create lasting health and how to discover and live fully their life's dream. The mission of the not-for-profit school is to:

- Empower people to make their own wise choices for life and health.
- Create the model for macrobiotic education and to move macrobiotics into the mainstream.
- Demystify and simplify macrobiotics to allow access to a much larger number of people.

Skeem said in our first session that she did not intend to fully convert me to a macrobiotic lifestyle, which, as I understand it, would require my buying into the belief that food affects my health and happiness. Followers of macrobiotics eat a diet comprised of food that is less processed, more natural and prepared with more traditional methods of cooking.

Whatever it's all about, it certainly works for Skeem. And maybe it will work for me, too.