A Balancing Act

By Jeffrey Larnard

It’s Friday night. You put on your clothes, look at yourself in the mirror, and know that you look good. You can feel your confidence surging as you hear the newest Rihanna song blaring from the speakers. As an attractive co-ed walks through the door, you do not hesitate. You walk over to her and in what seems like seconds, you are talking and being yourself with her.

Everyone wants to feel and look their best. When we do, we are confident, successful, and attractive. There are a number of ways to achieve this feeling, but a significant one is to eat in a way that results in a sustainable, healthy weight. Whether you are here in the dining commons, in your dorm, or out to eat somewhere, you have the ability to control how many calories you are putting into your body. If you can successfully manage the calories you consume, in addition to the calories you burn, you should be able to see and feel a difference in your weight over time.

Although there are other factors, losing or gaining weight is mostly a matter of how many calories you are consuming versus how many calories you are burning. If you consume more calories than you are burning, you will likely gain weight, and if you consume fewer calories than you are burning, you will likely lose weight. The calories you take in come from the foods and beverages that you consume over a day. The calories that you burn are mostly a result of your basal metabolic rate (the energy it takes to sustain normal bodily processes), but also are a result of food digestion and physical activity.

The number of calories you need in a day varies from person to person and depends on your gender, age, size, and physical activity level. If you have a few minutes, the website SuperTracker has a great tool that allows you to enter data about yourself to find out just how many calories you need a day. This is based on information about your body and how much you usually exercise. Although exercise is a critical component of balancing calories, eating to balance calories is much trickier to accomplish. There are three main places that you will likely find yourself eating here at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, especially during your first year: the dining commons, in the dorm, and off campus.
At the Dining Commons:

The smell of the different foods, the hum of conversation, and the sheer amount of people walking around can make the dining commons seem intimidating. The dining commons here at the University of Massachusetts present an interesting scenario. After all, every meal is now essentially a buffet, and the variety of foods available is striking. How are you supposed to balance calories in this free-for-all environment? Luckily, there are some things that make the challenge of eating right less daunting. Everything has the calories per serving labeled, making it easier to figure out a rough estimate of how many calories you are consuming. Plus, there are always host of healthy options available, from different whole grains to a salad bar. It takes some getting used to, but the dining commons can help with managing weight. Here are some quick suggestions to get you started in the dining commons:

- Be aware of portion sizes, as they can get out of control quickly.
- Ditch the refined grains for whole grains. There is almost always whole grain pasta, bread, and rice available, and these contain more fiber, protein, and other nutrients per serving than their white counterparts.
- Be aware of mindless eating. Just because someone else at your table is eating, does not mean you have to be too.
- Beverages can contribute a significant amount of empty calories. Choose water, tea, low-fat milk or a small glass of fruit juice instead of soft drinks.

In the Dorm:

Everyone has had that night when they came back to their dorm at 2 in the morning and ate an entire sleeve of Oreos or a bag of Doritos. Even if you are diligent about caloric intake in the dining halls, eating poorly in the dorm can sabotage your efforts at balancing calories. Long nights of studying or aimlessly surfing the internet are conducive to mindless eating and this can cause problems for managing weight if it becomes a pattern. Food found in dorms also tends to be high in calories, low in nutritional value, and easy to overeat. Just like in the dining commons, portion control is paramount. Also, try to eat foods that are high in fiber, protein, and healthy fats that will induce feelings of satiety. Here are some suggestions to help control caloric intake while in the dorm:
• Pay attention to the serving size on food containers and try getting only that amount out of the container and then putting the container back out of reach.
• Pair whole-grain crackers with a high protein dip like hummus or peanut butter.
• Keep high fiber fruits like apples and bananas in the room.
• Know your enemy. Try not to buy foods that you have no semblance of self-control around.

Dining Out:

After eating almost exclusively at the dining commons, it is only a matter of time before you and your friends decide to walk into Amherst for a dinner out. As with eating in a dorm, dining out can undermine your best efforts at balancing calories. It can be genuinely shocking to see just how many calories are in our favorite restaurant meals or drinks. There are, however, a few strategies that can help to ensure that you do not throw off your plan to manage your weight:

• Try to eat out as little as possible.
• If you get a large portion, eat half of it and then save the rest for a later meal.
• Order water with your meal, as it will save not only calories, but money too.
• Keep in mind that most appetizers and desserts are high in calories, and if you do get one, try to split it with one or more people.

Balancing calories to manage weight is not easy. It takes continuous effort to know what you are putting into your body, and also to engage in regular physical activity. But here’s the thing: it gets easier. After a while, you will start to have a better idea of portion sizes and relative amounts of calories in foods. You should not have to spend the rest of your life counting calories! Instead, you should be able to eat healthily intuitively, by eating enough to satisfy you when you are hungry. Keep in mind that just because you are trying to manage your weight, you can still indulge yourself once in a while. The key to managing weight is to balance your calories over the long haul. It will take time, patience, and perseverance, but this is achievable for everyone. And who knows, maybe it will eventually give you the confidence to talk to that co-ed from math class.