

Simply Simmons

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The Richard Simmons I interviewed during a '97 retreat at the Mt. Laurel Resort in White Haven, Pennsylvania, was not the flamboyant person I had read countless articles on. I was expecting a "court jester of fitness." Instead, I was presented with a sincere, sensitive, humorous, and very unique individual that doesn't want to be called names anymore.

"I hate it when people say I'm the 'Weight Saint,' or the 'Diet Guru,'" Simmons said. "It's not just about weight loss. It's about your whole life."

And Simmons should know -- he's spent half his life teaching the valuable lesson of health to millions of overweight people.



What makes Simmons such an expert in the field of health and fitness?

Because he actually practices what he's preaching.

For over 35 years, Simmons has maintained a 130-pound weight loss, as well as a recovery from compulsive eating. He's been there, and he knows how devastating it can be to lose weight the wrong way.

Being an overweight child was difficult for Simmons.

"I was the fattest kid in school, the fattest kid in the neighborhood, the fattest kid I ever met," Simmons said.

Simmons started out with diet pills at the age of eight, was on countless diets, tried laxatives, and experimented with vomiting.

In 1968, at the top weight of 268 pounds, a 20-year-old Richard found a note on the windshield of his car that stated, "Dear Richard : Fat people die young. Please don't die."

Taking the words to heart, Richard lost 137 pounds in 2-1/2 months by starving himself, taking diet pills, undergoing hypnosis, and obsessively exercising. He became very ill and lost his hair and nails from malnutrition. Simmons eventually underwent costly facial plastic surgery and extensive hair transplants to repair the damage.

As a result, Simmons made a vow to research and learn how to safely lose weight, maintain it, and practice a fit and healthy lifestyle.

“I tried to be perfect,” Simmons said. “I’m just not a perfect person. I can’t eat perfect, and I’m not perfect with food. So, I get about a D- with the food, but I think I get an A+ with the exercise.”

Thus was born the multi-million dollar Richard Simmons line of books, the Deal-A-Meal weight loss plan, exercise videos, audio tapes, athletic shoes, totes, fitness equipment, fat-free cookies and snacks, and a line of women’s fashions.

He obviously doesn’t have any financial worries, so what keeps the 57-year-old Simmons so compelled to continue his life work of healing the weight impaired?

Because he genuinely cares about the people who seek his guidance.

“There are people in your lives who have hurt you, people close to you, sometimes even family,” Simmons said during a speech at the Mt. Laurel Resort. “And sometimes even those that you thought loved you very much. And they forgot to say something very important to you. So let me say it for them. ‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry if I hurt you or put you down because you’re overweight. I’m sorry if I treated you like a second-class citizen. I’m sorry if I’ve only looked at the numbers on the scale, instead of what was inside your heart.’”

Simmons has lived through obesity and truly understands the issues behind the weight. He knows that diet alone will not shed pounds from a heavy heart and soul.

“Please accept all these ‘I’m sorry’s,’” Simmons continued. “Because before you can start to get healthy, lose weight, and have self-esteem and dignity, you must forgive those who have hurt you. And go on. The past is a page you’ve already read, and the present is the day you’re living.”

Simmons lives each day to the fullest, as if it may be his last.

“When God gives me a new day,” Simmons said, “I immediately say my prayers and get myself ready. I get my legal pad, go through all the things that I didn’t do yesterday, and plan my day. I’m very organized with my day, because every moment counts for me. I could be hit by a Sara Lee truck tomorrow, you just never know when you’re going to go.”

Simmons starts each day by giving himself some compliments and setting goals early in the morning to last the whole day.

“A lot of people who don’t have passions or goals in life just stop caring,” Simmons said. “If they don’t care about their life or job, then why should they care about what they look like or their weight? It’s all about goals.”

Simmons knows that food can be a comforting friend when times are rough.

“Things have happened to me, and I’ve turned to food,” Simmons said. “It’s very easy to do. It’s always there, and food doesn’t talk back.”

Simmons states that exercise is essential for weight loss and maintenance.

“Your body needs to work out,” Simmons said. “Even if it’s just walking for a block. I get letters from people in their sixties and seventies who have started to walk for five minutes. And then it becomes ten minutes, and then it becomes twenty minutes. Even though some of you are sitting in chairs, or some of you are doing partial exercises with many starts and stops, remember, exercise is truly the key.”

Simmons is a firm believer in the power of positive thinking.

“A person should learn how to dress attractively, do their make-up and fix their hair,” said Simmons when asked what positive thinking “mental exercises” he’d recommend to a beginner contemplating a weight loss program.

According to Simmons, high self-esteem is a powerful tool to use in achieving and maintaining physical well-being.

“A person should learn how to feel good about themselves as they are right now, and have some dignity,” Simmons said. “If you feel good about yourself and project this to the public, then others will feel good about you too. Feeling good about yourself boosts your self-esteem.”

For Simmons, his retreats and cruises provide a social and supportive purpose.

“Overweight people tend to isolate themselves from others, and feel that they are all alone,” Simmons said. “Some people out there can do it alone. It’s like quitting smoking. Some people can do it cold turkey. But I’m very much into groups. One of the main reasons I do retreats and cruises is because a lot of these people network and meet each other. There are people here at this retreat who may just live around the corner from someone in this room, and they have never met before. So, people get addresses and telephone numbers and start to group up and get to know each other. I think that’s very important. There are also groups like Weight Watchers, Tops, and Overeaters Anonymous. I’m for anything that can work for you. Because it’s hard to do it by yourself. When you’re overweight, your self-esteem is a little low. And when you have other people around you that are like you, and going through what you’re going through, their support provides strength.”

Simmons is very open to receiving mail, and often encourages people to write him at P.O. Box 5403, Beverly Hills, CA 90209-5403.

“I still go to the post office and get my own mail,” said Simmons with a sentimental smile. “The post office keeps telling me, ‘Richard, this box is too small.’ And I tell them that I cannot change P.O. Box 5403, that I’ve had it for 32 years.”

In response to the thousands of letters he receives annually, Simmons usually makes about 25 phone calls a day during the week and 50 phone calls a day on the weekend.

Simmons continues to be a source of inspiration and hope for those who are desperately trying to win the weight war.

“I guess the reason people have been so kind to me over the years is because I’m their cheerleader,” Simmons said. “I love them unconditionally. I’m the voice that tells them not to be so hard on themselves if they think they’ve failed a health program. I’m the voice that says it’s time to stop the negativity, let’s start over again, let’s start anew.”

Let’s do start anew, and agree to stop the name-calling of Richard Simmons.

No need for fancy labels or titles, he’s just simply Simmons -- a motivator for those seeking a healthier physical, mental, spiritual, and nutritional way of life.