Stop Fighting Your Body and Start Working With It

A Guide to Set Point Theory (a handout for clients)

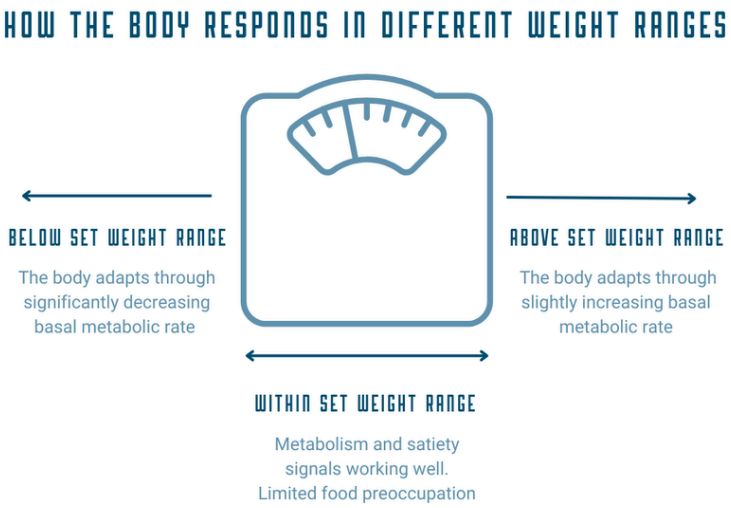
What is Set Point Theory?

Set Point Theory is the idea that your body has a natural weight range that it's most comfortable maintaining. This range is determined by your genetics, metabolism, and hormones - factors that are mostly out of your control.

Think of it like a thermostat in your home. When the temperature gets too hot or cold, the thermostat kicks in to bring it back to the set temperature. Your body works similarly with weight.

As in the image below, according to this theory:

- If you go below your natural weight range, your metabolism slows down and your hunger increases
- If you go above your natural weight range, your metabolism tends to speed up to bring you back, though the body seems to defend against weight loss more strongly than weight gain



What the Research Shows Us

<u>The Evidence That Supports Set Point Theory:</u>

Metabolism slows down significantly during dieting. One of the best-known studies showing this is the Minnesota Starvation Study, and many studies since then have found the same thing. Your body's energy expenditure slows down when you eat less and speeds up when you eat more.

Getting better from a restrictive eating disorder usually means weight restoration. Research shows that leaving treatment below a healthy weight makes relapse more likely, and that the right weight is different for each person, based on their own history and growth.

Your body fights to return to its natural range. Studies on people who have lost significant amounts of weight show that their bodies continue trying to regain that weight through slower metabolism and increased hunger signals - sometimes for years.

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What's Not as Clear:

It's actually a weight *range*, not a single point. Your body seems to be comfortable within a range of several kilos, not one exact number, and the size of that range differs from person to person.

Hunger signals can get mixed up. While the theory says hunger should increase when you're below your set point, this doesn't always happen reliably. People who have been restricting food for a long time might not feel hungry, and people at higher weights might still feel very hungry due to other factors like stress or disordered eating patterns.

Everyone's body responds differently. Some people's metabolisms slow down more dramatically than others when they diet. If you've been dieting on and off for many years, your body may have gotten very good at slowing down to conserve energy, which can make each diet less effective than the last.

What We Often See in Practice

Many people who have a history of dieting and are above their past lowest weights initially gain some weight when they start eating adequately again. Over time (usually 18-24 months), their weight often starts to come down naturally until they reach their body's comfortable range (for people who aren't underweight).

This process happens because:

- Your body needs to restore energy reserves that were depleted
- Your metabolism needs time to heal from years of restriction
- Your hormones need to rebalance

Everyone's experience is different, but this pattern is common for people with a long history of dieting.

Finding and Accepting Your Natural Weight Range

If you want to find your body's natural weight range, it's helpful to work with a dietitian who specialises in eating disorders and understands long-term dieting. Be prepared that your natural weight might be higher than you expect. Keep in mind that set point theory describes general patterns from research, not a guaranteed weight for any one person. Everyone's body, history and medical situation is different, so your treating team can help you work out what's right for you.

Your Set Point Might Be:

- Higher than what you'd prefer
- Higher than cultural ideals suggest
- Higher than your family members
- Higher than what you've weighed in the past through dieting
- Higher than what some doctors might recommend based on BMI alone

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The Reality of Set Point

Your natural weight range is largely set by your genes and biology, and dieting doesn't move it in the long term. This can be a difficult truth to accept, but it can also be incredibly freeing.

Understanding your set point means:

- You can stop fighting your body and start working with it
- You can focus on health behaviours rather than the number on the scale
- You can end the cycle of dieting and weight regain
- You can develop a more peaceful relationship with food and your body

Moving Forward

If your natural weight range is higher than you hoped, we strongly encourage you to seek support around body acceptance. This might include:

- Working with a therapist who specialises in body image
- Learning about Health at Every Size principles
- Focusing on how your body feels rather than how it looks
- Celebrating what your body can do rather than what it weighs

Remember: **Your worth is not determined by a number on a scale. Your body is trying to keep you healthy and alive - and sometimes that means maintaining a weight that's higher than you might want, but is right for your individual biology.**

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