



## The Best Weight-Loss Goal Is No Goal

By focusing on wellness, chef Virginia Willis lost 65 pounds and gained a new perspective

**T**HE EDITOR at a national health magazine pestered me for weeks. She wanted to tell the story of my triumph: how I'd lost 40 pounds and, in 2015, published an award-winning cookbook on how to make Southern comfort food healthier.

The thing was, I knew I no longer fit the story. Four years after the book came out, my career of cooking, eating and drinking, plus weathering personal stress through food, had piled the pounds back on. And when I finally confessed my new weight to the editor, she ghosted me. That was my tipping point. Something had to *really* change this time.

Instead of dieting toward a target weight, I decided to aim for “healthy and strong.” I began walking for exercise and slowly changing my relationship with food. I wanted it to nourish me, not numb me. When COVID hit, I started meditating and journaling too.

What I discovered through this yearslong, introspective process was that the best way for me to protect my health was with what I call life guardrails. Real guardrails keep your car out of the ditch. In the same way, my life guardrails help me stay on track. My three main guardrails are to eat healthy, exercise and practice mindful behavior every day. With

habit, repetition and consistency, I gradually lost 65 pounds and have kept them off for two years.

But being healthy and strong is not just about weight. It's physical, mental and spiritual wellness. And wellness is not a destination; it's a path. No one can be perfect, but I believe that if you stay on the path more often than not, you're doing all right.

You can still eat foods that are delicious—even sometimes indulgent and decadent—and lose weight. I am a real-life example that this can be done, as long as you stay mindful of what you're eating. One of my favorite desserts is carrot cake. The standard recipe *seems* healthy—it's full of vegetables, right? But it usually has a ton of oil. So I boost the moisture with crushed pineapple and go lighter on the oil. (Of course, the cake and frosting still contain sugar, so it's important to enjoy this treat in moderation.)

By making a habit of eating well, I'm not just taking care of my body—I'm feeling good about my entire body. And that's the biggest change of all. ■

*Virginia Willis, 56, is a chef instructor for Food Network Kitchen and author of the James Beard award-winning cookbook Lighten Up, Y'all. She lives in Atlanta.*



Want to try Willis' lower-fat carrot cake? Scan this code with your phone, or visit [aarp.org/carrotcake](http://aarp.org/carrotcake).