

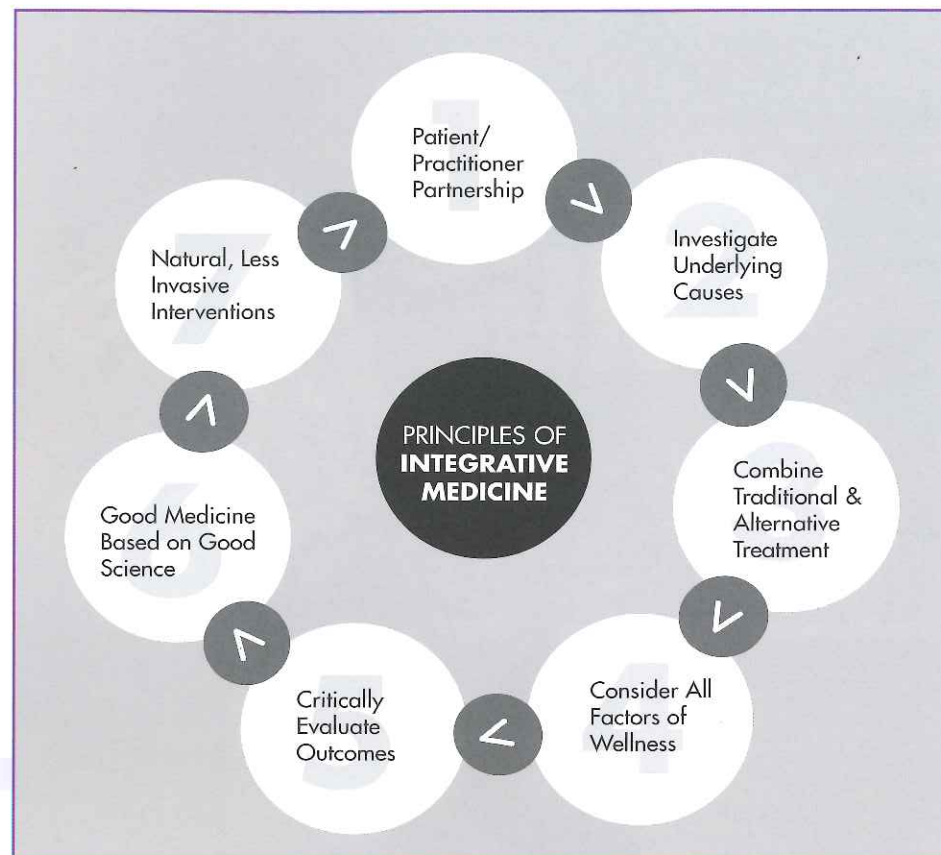
# Alternate-Day Fasting

BY HAYDEN FIELD / GRAPHICS BY JUSTIN CLAY

The air in her serene bedroom retains the quality of a mother's cool fingers pressing down on your forehead. Grey-blue walls enclose a potted orchid, a porcelain teacup, a pale blue lantern with a golden light inside. But the soothing quality of Jessica Meli's bedroom does not reflect the battle she began fighting in May 2011 against her body's inexplicable 100-pound weight gain — a war against a faulty thyroid, scheming food sensitivities and high levels of sneaky bad bacteria. Her weapon against obesity? Alternative medicine.

Her battle began in May 2011, with Meli gaining five pounds per week while only consuming about 800 calories. She picked up her war weapon by going to an alternative medical clinic that specializes in natural hormone replacement, where her test results showed her that multiple factors were contributing to her weight gain — namely a deficiency in three key hormones, internal inflammation caused by her dairy and gluten sensitivities, a cortisol imbalance in her adrenal glands and a vitamin deficiency.

Dr. Susan Tanner, a doctor of holistic medicine at Southern Environmental Medicine Center, says Meli's health issues are much more common than most people realize. She cites a common and vicious cycle as responsible for Meli's cortisol imbalance. "The adrenal system is producing cortisol to buffer the body against stressors of any kind, whether emotional, physical or illness," she says. "It keeps bumping up



cortisol to try to help buffer the body against these reactions, and then excessive amounts of cortisol cause blood sugar and insulin problems that affect the metabolism. The other reason is that a reason that a lot of people develop these in the first place is they have some issues with their ability to break down and absorb molecules of food."

Meli agrees with Dr. Tanner's approach because she believes in attacking a problem such as her weight gain and other health issues directly at its source.

"Traditional modern medicine is very symptom-oriented and is very good at treating acute problems, but it has almost no regard for underlying causes for the symptoms that you have," Meli says, sitting cross-legged on her lilac bedspread. Her wavy black hair sets off intense blue-green eyes that continuously verify we're on the same page.

"The drug companies just want to stay in business; they have a huge say on what modern doctors are allowed to do."

The doctors at Meli's first alternative clinic were a little stumped. They prescribed a thyroid hormone replacement drug, recommended detox saunas and started Meli on estrogen and progesterone hormone replacement. When her menstrual cycle didn't regulate after three months, they started her on the Wiley Protocol — an extreme hormone replacement method used for men desiring sex changes. Two months later, Meli's cycle was regular again, but she didn't stick with alternative medicine because she didn't see the immediate weight loss results she craved.

"[The weight loss] often takes many months, but most people will see some weight loss even within the first month," says Dr. Tanner. "It may not be dramatic, but it will be some. The first step is that we'll start patients on an elimination diet; we're taking out all of the most common inflammatory foods. It doesn't mean they're always sensitive for that particular patient, but if we remove those, we're usually hitting some of them."

In the meantime, Meli's array of health problems, including significant weight gain, was starting to take a major toll on her emotional well-being as well as physical.

"I felt like I completely lost my identity because I was super focused on my figure before, like obsessively, and it was just like I felt like I was completely losing control," Meli says. "When I was at my heaviest I was just really depressed, and I barely ever went to class. I would just stay inside all day. I stopped doing the things I love to do — I wouldn't go shopping, I wouldn't go hiking, I just basically was a shut-in. I had always been a straight-A student and failed my first class ever, and I completely let my grades slip for all of my sophomore year. Everything just went to shit. That sucked... I just felt like I had nothing. I lost my weight, my grades, my relationships, some friendships, things like that—so that was really hard."

Meli began seeing another doctor at the same time, a traditional (read: not alternative) endocrinologist who switched her to a more standard thyroid hormone replacement drug. Meli continued to gain weight, then later started to maintain it. But above all, she wanted to feel like herself again.

"I decided to try an alternative route again this past summer 2013," Meli explains, simultaneously pulling out a huge bamboo basket filled with blue-, black-, and white-capped supplements to illustrate her point. "It's called Progressive Medical Center, and they have a team of doctors from MDs to naturopaths and nutritionists who basically do a very comprehensive approach to your problems and test a lot of different things."

Meli lost seven pounds over the course of summer 2013 by simply cutting out gluten and dairy to humor her food sensitivities, but she attributes most of her weight loss (20 pounds in a month and a half) to a method called alternate-day fasting — eating 300 cal-

ories every other day on her "fast days" and eating normally on others.

"I have more energy and more focus, and so far I've noticed that my hypoglycemia has gone away," Meli says, smiling. "I used to do the thing where you do small meals every couple hours, and I would get shaky and headache-y after three to four hours without eating... I was really hesitant [to try alternate-day fasting] because you always hear about your metabolism shutting down from fasting and all this stuff."

But a BBC documentary called "Eat, Fast and Live Longer" and Seth Roberts, a personal science blogger who posted a success story, changed Meli's mind. Roberts's friend Dave was overweight, struggling with hypoglycemia and gluten and dairy sensitivities just like Meli. But when he attempted alternate-day fasting, his hypoglycemia went away, he lost weight and was eventually able to eat gluten and dairy again whenever he so desired. "I feel really great right now; I have more energy," Meli says. "I don't have those horrible episodes where I pass out for hours on end at a time; I feel physically lighter, like I can do more things... It's just kind of surreal, actually, because I

"I think a lot of people have food sensitivities they don't know they have, such as gluten and dairy, because it doesn't necessarily give you symptoms that happen immediately when you eat it," she says. "When you eat something and can't breathe, you know, but sometimes with these sensitivities there's a headache, fatigue or mild gastrointestinal discomfort but not anything that's so dramatic as, 'Oh, it's because I ate this or that.'"

She also strongly believes that antibiotics worsen health issues like Meli's due to over-prescription and over-digestion in antibiotic-laden foods.

"The inflammation leads to mal-digestion and hits the small intestinal lining, the body sends out antibodies to those spots and the cause of that inflammation can be the starting point for food sensitivities," Dr. Tanner says.

Meli herself suggests that people considering alternative medicine treatments for obesity should focus on gut and colon health because that can affect the thyroid and is known to be a huge cause for inflammation, weight gain and other functional problems.

She also underscores the importance of eliminating food sensitivities,

taking probiotics to support digestive health, taking the right vitamins and trying out alternate-day fasting in a healthy way. The combination of her current alternative medical treatments propel Meli to look towards the future with a bright outlook about what she can accomplish.

"I've always loved the outdoors, and it's always been one of my lifelong goals to be able to do an intense hiking trip thorough the mountains, like a week-long thing," Meli explains with a hopeful smile. "I want to really just be doing things like yoga and rock climbing and biking again for fun and basically just be able to feel like I can do a lot of things. Feeling energized and active is my goal, more than anything else."

"I feel really great right now; I have more energy... I feel like for the first time I'm not struggling against anything."

— Jessica Meli

feel like for the first time I'm not struggling against anything. I go out to eat more, I have more fun with things and I have this awesome sense of liberation. I always felt like I was rallying against something that wouldn't move, like I was slamming into a brick wall, and I feel like now I'm progressing."

Dr. Tanner believes that vitamin deficiencies and other medical problems cause a vast majority of metabolic and health issues for people like Meli.

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