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### Reframe weight-loss message to healthy eating, lifestyles

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Considering the cultural fondness for appropriating certain months of the year to focus on diseases, I'm astonished that January has not been designated as National Obesity Awareness Month. Or perhaps simply You Are a Corpulent Pig Month. But given the alarming spate of TV commercials for diet programs, capitalizing on new year's resolutions, I suppose the message has been delivered.

Is there anyone on Earth who doesn't know by now that Valerie Bertinelli has lost 40 pounds?

Of course we expect this from the diet industry, but it's depressing to see the number of public health officials who have reduced the formula for healthy living to a number on the scale or body mass index measurement. By making fat public enemy No. 1, a lot of us are ashamed, frustrated and, ultimately, turned off.

"I think the 'War on Fat' is horrendous," said Deb Burgard, a psychologist in Los Altos who specializes in dealing with eating disorders and body image concerns. "There should just be an emphasis on empirically supported research about what makes people healthy; eat lots of fruits and vegetables, get physical activity, get enough sleep, don't smoke or drink excessively.

"But telling a lot of people that they have to weigh a certain amount is like saying, 'Hey, just go out and make a million dollars!' It's not going to work."

Sending the message that being an "acceptable" weight is merely a matter of willpower also doesn't take into account little details like genetics and lifestyle constraints. For example, what if you live in an area where you don't have access to a lot of fresh produce?

Gail Woodward-Lopez, associate director of the University of California-Berkeley's Center for Weight and Health, said that the message about healthy eating needs to be reframed. (She seems to be immune to the constant advertising about diet programs and is one of those rare individuals who had not heard about Ms. Bertinelli's shrinkage.)

"All this emphasis on weight-loss detracts from stressing what healthy eating really is and policies that support it," she said. "The discussion right now puts a lot of blame on people. We need to accept that people will have a range of weights - but we could have a healthier range than what we have now."

This time of year can be especially tough for people with eating disorders. Once they have weathered the holiday season, complete with an avalanche of chocolate and gravy and the emotional triggers of spending a lot of time with family members, they get

dumped into Weight-Loss January. All the diet yammering gives anorexics and bulimics tacit permission to ramp up their disorders.

"This focus on the pound is a recipe for disaster," said Janice Bremis, executive director of the Eating Disorders Resource Center in San Jose. "If there's any message out there right now that we like it's that diets don't work."

Wouldn't it be nice if the knee-jerk health checklist could be expanded beyond the forbidden foods list? Burgard suggested that if we spent as much energy on making our lives better as we do on dieting in January, we would have a much healthier year: "How about making a resolution to get out into nature more often or get more rest or get out of that bad relationship? That's a lot more healthy than worrying that you're not thin enough."

She acknowledges that this is not a very popular message right now when the 'skinny jeans' have been resurrected in the new year. But it's a message we may be ready to hear in March when reality sets back in.

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*Sue Hutchison's column appears Tuesday in SV Life and Sunday in LifeStyle. Contact her at [shutchison@mercurynews.com](mailto:shutchison@mercurynews.com). Find more of her columns and a link to her blog at [www.mercurynews.com/suehutchison](http://www.mercurynews.com/suehutchison).*