



KEVIN O'NEILL / STAFF ARTIST

Health help

App makes counting calories easy as pie

My self-image is in conflict with my scale, mirror, recent photos of me, and my doctor's sphygmomanometer (the device used to check your blood pressure). In my mind's eye, I'm the picture of health, fit and trim as I was in college. But according to all the so-called "objective evidence," I'm a little thicker around the middle than I should be.

I've always thought of myself as above average, so it's a little disconcerting when I find myself achieving every average statistic of middle age. The thinning and greying of my hair should have been a warning to me, but I wouldn't listen. I've also managed to ignore the dark, fuzzy marks on documents where the small type used to be.

The inevitable passage of time became impossible for me to ignore this past summer when I hurt my back just bending over. After several days of unrelenting pain, I went to see my doctor, Peter Cagnetti. I've known Peter since I was a kid and he was the summer playground instructor. His dog followed me home one day and decided to stay for good.

The same old story

He checked me out and sent me for X-rays. The X-ray technician told me I had some arthritis in my spine and an old fracture in one of my vertebrae. I was alarmed by this, but she told me my back actually looked pretty good for "someone my age." That didn't make me feel any better.

Dr. Cagnetti diagnosed me with muscle strain and set me on a path to recovery. He told me almost everyone my age has occasional back problems. That didn't make me feel any better either.

That wasn't the end of my reckoning. As part of his exam, he took my blood pressure, and he didn't like the numbers he saw. Despite my insistence that at home my numbers are fine, he informed me that his numbers, combined with my age, family history, weight, diet and the law of averages, indicated that I needed to start taking medicine that would save my life. It's hard to argue with a guy who taught me to make gimp friendship bracelets, gave me his dog and has unassailable logic on his side.

Old dog, new tricks

In light of my recent acceptance of my mortality, I've decided to enlist technology in my quest to combat the ravages of time. I've started using Lose It!, an app and website (Loseit.com) that helps you keep track of your eating and exercise. The app is available for iOS (iPhone, iPod and iPad) and Android devices.

The app, which is free, is easy to set up and operate. You enter initial information about your age, gender, weight and height that will be the basis for metabolic calculations. Then you can declare a weight loss goal. Enter your current weight, followed by your desired weight and how quickly you want to achieve it. For instance, I decided I wanted to lose 10 pounds at a rate of one pound per week. The app then gives you your daily calorie budget.

Simply record what you eat during the day, as well as any exercise

you do. A running tally is kept of the calories you consume and burn. It's displayed on an easy-to-read, thermometer-type graph that stays green as long as you're under budget, but turns red when you go over. In addition, a message is displayed stating how many more calories you can eat for the day.

New age meets old problem

There are extensive lists of foods and exercises you can pick from. Adding foods or activities is easy and intuitive. A number of helpful screens display relevant information in easy-to-read formats. A line graph tracks your weight loss, or gain, as you near your goal. A daily log lists everything you ate, along with the calorie count, and all your exercise, with the calories burned for each activity. You also can look at entire weeks to see if the days you went over budget are offset by days you were under. Readouts can be customized to track specific nutrients, such as sodium or fats.

Lose It! allows you to set up motivators to help you stay on track. These take the form of text or email reminders, creating a social network of supportive friends or winning virtual badges for progress. The app automatically syncs with the website if you set up an account. You can use either to enter data, track your progress or interact with friends.

The app and website are nicely designed and easy to use. Lose It! helps make keeping tabs on your health and counting calories easy.

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