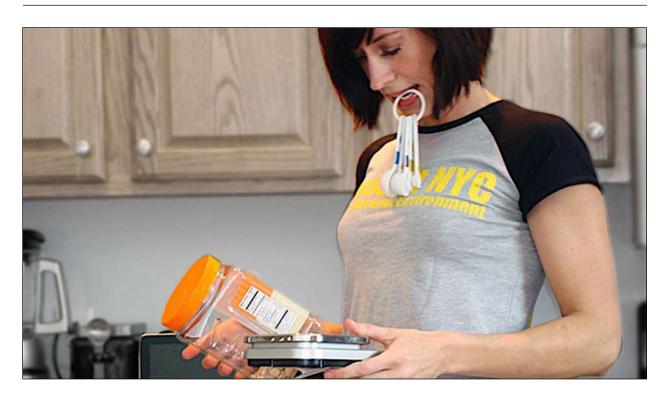# Zone Gone Bad

It's easy to take a healthy concept—like the Zone Diet—and twist it in an unhealthy way. Here's a 5-step plan back to good eating.

Melissa Byers

Eight weeks ago, my sister Kelly, a 31-year-old public relations executive, went to a seminar at CrossFit Virtuosity in New York City called "Dialing in Your Diet." There, she learned all about making good food choices and how to work the Zone diet principles. She wrote a glowing review of the course for my blog the following week, and began to immediately apply what she had learned to her daily eating habits. Over the next few weeks, she emailed me lots of Zone questions, sent over sample meals for review, and shared her daily food log. She was weighing, measuring, and tracking...and seeing quick improvements in her energy level, training performance, and physical appearance. She loved the Zone, and what it was doing for her fitness.

Fast forward to last week, when I received this email from Kelly:

> "This Zone thing is getting out of hand, and I am really am frustrated with myself for not being able to keep it in check. Bagels, cereal and pasta terrify me. I'm afraid to put any kind of cheat in my mouth, much less a sweet. I agonize over everything I can't measure (like when I go out for dinner). And I'm CONSTANTLY checking myself out in the mirror — for what? It's taking over every thought; every meal and snack. Journaling my food intake has become an obsession, not a healthy tracking tool. Help."

Kelly has always been a very healthy eater, with a strong self-image. She has never been one to starve herself, crash diet, or obsess about appearance. Yet after spending just a few weeks working the balanced and sensible principles of the Zone diet, Kelly found herself trapped in an unhealthy cycle—with what some might refer to as "disordered behavior" related to food. The Zone was no longer a healthy dietary lifestyle, but a set of self-imposed rules that somehow became associated with serious (if vague) consequences if not followed.

Her experience mirrored my own. When I first started with CrossFit and the Zone in December 2007, I enjoyed the precision of weighing, measuring, and tracking my intake. There was no guessing or estimating; the plan was well outlined and easy to follow. And I saw positive results quickly. My energy was better, my workouts were strong and I was continuing to build muscle. But unlike Kelly, I do have a history of unhealthy eating behaviors, and those behaviors began to rear their ugly head just a few weeks into my Zone experience. Slowly, my brain began to take the healthy activities associated with the Zone diet and twist them back into my prior disordered behaviors. I stopped eating anything unless I could measure it. I spent hours on FitDay (a free online diet and fitness journal), plugging in different food choices to arrive at the perfect balance of ratios. I began to obsess over my body composition, spending far too much time in the mirror. Food began to rule my life, and before I knew it, what had started as Zone had morphed into a Zone-inspired eating disorder.

I've seen this very scenario unfold with more than a few women. It's a phenomenon I call "Zone Gone Bad." Something that starts off as healthy and balanced slides into dangerous territory, where diet defines you, food is the enemy and self-worth comes straight out of the mirror. How does this happen, why does it happen, and what can other CrossFitters stuck in this pattern to do break out of it?

Beware the "Some is Good, More is Better" Syndrome

From personal experience, I don't know a single woman who has not, at one time or another, had body image concerns, or at least flirted with harmful eating habits. Most likely, these habits were born out of an inherently healthy desire to feel and look better—to become more "fit." Some women just go about approaching this fitness quest in an unhealthy way: eating too little and training too much.

CrossFit, in particular, is going to appeal to the women looking to reconnect with healthy fitness and dietary practices. CrossFit promotes a functional, balanced, wholesome approach to fitness, focused on performance instead of appearance. It is the polar opposite of other fitness programs, geared around six-pack abs or losing three dress sizes. Those programs do nothing but feed a woman's unhealthy behavior: hours on the treadmill and starving in the name of "skinny." Often, women who are trying to break those unhealthy patterns are drawn to CrossFit in an effort to achieve the same end (feeling better and looking good) via a healthier mechanism.

In addition, I suspect that CrossFit tends to attract "Type A" perfectionist personalities. Those of us who fit the bill enjoy the strict structure of the workouts, the attention to perfect form, the weighing, the timing, the counting, and the tracking of statistics and results. The dedication and passion the program inspires naturally encourages us to apply the same principles to our eating habits, since we know about the importance of diet to achieving training and fitness goals. So we read, research, and practice what we think to be the very best dietary principles. The phenomenal results that the Zone has produced for CrossFitters cinches the deal.

Unfortunately, past ingrained, unhealthy behaviors can rise again when a Type A and/or eating-disordered woman starts CrossFit and the Zone. First, our person-alities and old habits tend to drive us in one general direction: *if some is good, more is better.* How many new CrossFitters have you seen come into the program in a sensible fashion, following the main website, scaling to their abilities, taking rest days... but quickly venturing into overtrained (or worse, injured) territory? I hear about it all the time in my conversations with new CrossFit women. We think, "if one WOD a day is good, then maybe two would get us more fit. If three rounds is good, then five is stronger work."

For many of us, whether we have a history with "real" eating disorders or simply have had issues with food, diet is a sensitive subject.

What's happening here is that our old history of unhealthy habits is overriding the new, healthy CrossFit habits. Despite the fact that CrossFit is about becoming functionally fit (which has *nothing* to do with how your stomach looks), the sneaky unhealthy part of your brain may tell you to spend another 15 minutes on the rower and burn a few extra calories. And it certainly wants to tell you that you shouldn't be eating quite that much food.

These ingrained impulses can be even more compelling when we start venturing into a new diet. For many of us, whether we have a history with "real" eating disorders or simply have had issues with food, diet is a sensitive subject. Old habits are hard to forget, and some of those habits may still play a part in our diets today.

Over-Analyzing Almonds and Eating Interventions

At my worst, I had a lot of rules around my food. Jelly and mustard were okay, because they had no fat, so I covered everything in one or the other. (Egg whites went with jelly, carrots went with mustard.) I avoided eating in front of other people, and when I had to, I would eat everything with a fork and knife—even things like bagels and apples—because you can hide how little you're eating if you cut everything up. I knew the caloric content of every single food I ate, and always kept a detailed mental tally of calories consumed and calories burned. My behavior
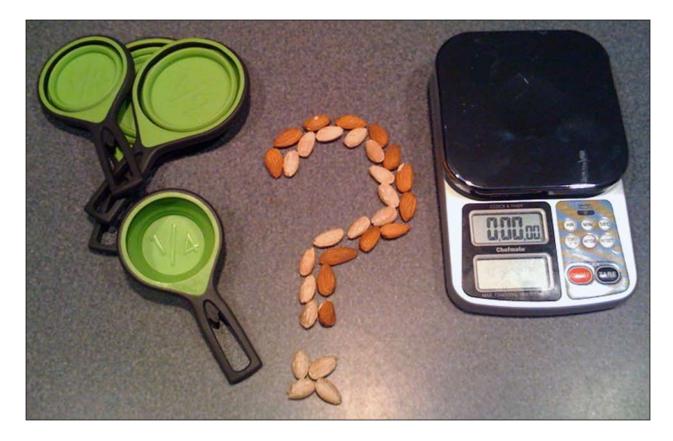
was certainly "disordered," even if I never quite ventured into a clinical category.

When many women like me (the old me, that is) start to Zone, the practice feels familiar and comfortable. The "rules" of the Zone may be easy to follow, because they aren't that far off from the self-imposed restrictions of your past behaviors. Weighing, measuring and tracking come second nature to you, both as a product of your CrossFitting (isn't that what we do with every workout?) and as the result of your past eating habits. But in this instance, you assure yourself, these rules are followed in the name of HEALTH. You get to apply the same stringent behaviors to your diet—but this time, it's actually good for you, as the Zone is designed for optimal weight, energy, and fitness.

But remember: Some of us have a *long* history of unhealthy eating habits lingering in our brains, and it may be hard to shove them aside when we first start to Zone. So while your focus may be laser-sharp at first— weighing, measuring, and eating exactly as much as you should be—it's easy to allow those past behaviors to creep into your daily Zone-related tasks. Your brain may start to twist the counting and tracking, and the Zone may begin to make you feel the way you used to feel, back when food was the enemy.

In my case, it started with the almonds. I was counting almonds during every snack; I would eat exactly 18. And then one day, I decided to eat only 15. Because if 18 was good, then if I cut back just a tiny bit, I could probably lean-out just a little quicker. Logically, I knew this not to be true, but my brain was trying to push these new habits into those old, sick (yet comfortable) behaviors. In my brain, more (in this case, more restriction) was better. So I dropped to 15 almonds at a time. Then 12. And then I started wondering what would happen if I cut back on other things I was eating. I spent hours on FitDay plugging in different foods to see where I could land my calories. If I arrived at 1,452 calories for the day, I would think that 1,400 was a much nicer number—so I'd skip a portion of my last meal. I don't know when or how the switch got flipped, but before I knew it, I had dropped muscle, my performance was suffering and I simply could not break the cycle of this Zone Gone Bad.

Friends and family noticed, too. I became more withdrawn, not wanting to eat in front of anyone else in case they noticed my strange food behaviors. I was on my laptop before and after every meal, plugging away at my stats. And I spent an ungodly amount of time in front of the mirror, checking out my abs, my legs, my arms, looking for miniscule body changes. But when my friends would express concern, I was able to fall back on the Zone. "No, it's fine—this is all part of the Zone. The Zone is healthy. It's supposed to make me a better CrossFitter."

One night, after watching me analyze every almond out of the jar and estimating whether it was "medium" or "large," my husband Scott held a one-man food intervention. He confronted me with how much time I was spending on my diet, how food had become a barrier to social interaction and how I was irritable and stressed all the time. And he was worried about me, because he was pretty sure that this *wasn't* how the Zone was supposed to work... despite what I'd been telling him.

At that point, I had become so exhausted with the rigidity of my diet that I confessed all, sharing with him how much time and energy I was *actually* spending on food. It was worse than he had imagined, probably because I'd had years of practice hiding my messed-up behaviors from others. He didn't know about the calorie cutting, or the FitDay fanaticism, or how often I flat-out lied about what I was eating or how much I was eating. (This was well before I started keeping a CrossFit Board training log and definitely pre-blog. I was keeping my food issues as quiet as possible in those days.) Once I confessed, I immediately felt better. But I had no idea how to move forward.

Scott and I talked about how I could stop the madness that had become my current diet and still work towards improved health and fitness. The idea of backing off what I was calling "the Zone" (and what he was calling "two steps away from an eating disorder") was terrifying, but I was exhausted mentally and physically, and he was determined to help me break the cycle.

The 5-Step Plan to Get Back in the Right Zone

So, if you find yourself stuck in a Zone Gone Bad, what can you do to come back towards good health, without abandoning a diet plan altogether? Here's what worked for me:

Step 1: Stop weighing, measuring and counting.
Right now, just stop. Not necessarily forever—but for a week or two, until you get yourself in check. Chances are, you've been Zoning for long enough that you know how much food you need to eat to meet your prescribed blocks. So start eyeballing it. No counting almonds, no measuring broccoli. Just prepare your food, and eat.

Step 2: Make sure you keep your diet clean.
Now is not the time to start making bad food choices; that will only wreak more mental havoc. You'll feel terrible, you'll gain weight and your performance will suffer, and you'll end up blaming the abandonment of Zone principles instead of the pizza and ice cream. Follow the CrossFit prescription of "meat and vegetables, nuts and seeds, some fruit, little starch, and no sugar" and avoid too many cheat meals.

Step 3: Get out of the mirror and off the scale.
Impose a moratorium on weighing yourself for at least two weeks, and don't allow yourself to stand in front of the mirror, turning, pinching and analyzing. Just let it go. Of course, you were spending an awful lot of time in front of the mirror, scrutinizing your physical appearance—so what should you do with all that extra energy? Take it to the gym.

Step 4: Get serious about measuring and tracking your workouts.
Keep a detailed log of how much sleep you are getting, the workouts you perform, your times and weights and results, how you felt and how you compared to a prior workout. Look for progress here, in the gym, where it matters. Treat every shaved second, every added pound on the bar, as a victory. And think about how those victories are possible because you are fueling yourself with all that good, healthy food.

Step 5: Repeat the cycle as you improve.
If you focus on performance, you'll want to make sure you are eating for performance. And if your performance continues to improve—if you are getting stronger and faster— then your body WILL fall into line. It HAS TO. And those body composition changes will help to encourage you to work harder, eat more, and get stronger.

In my case, I completely bailed on the Zone and simply started eating Paleo. I also changed my focus to a strength-based program, and began to eat a lot more than I was used to. I forced myself to gain weight—even if it wasn't all "clean" weight—to remind myself that I am NOT my six pack and to see what, if anything, the extra pounds did for my training. Not surprisingly, I quickly began to feel better. I had more energy, I was training harder, and most importantly, I was able to enjoy my food again. I saw it for what it was—fuel for my growing muscles—and spent all the extra time I used to spend on FitDay reading up on new training principles. I'm still eating Paleo, and I'm still not Zoning, but every once in a while I log my intake to make sure I'm still on track. So far, so good—and I have the training stats to prove it.

If you find yourself in a Zone Gone Bad, cut yourself some slack. You may be trying to retrain your brain to forget about years of unhealthy behaviors in favor of new, healthy habits. It's going to take time, and dedication, and maybe more than a few slips before you start permanently heading in the right direction. The Zone diet can be a valuable tool in your CrossFit arsenal, but it's not for everyone. In the end, the only thing that matters is that you are moving towards improved health and fitness—both physically and mentally.

As for my sister, she's still Zoning, but has eased up on the constant weighing and measuring. She has also taken some CrossFit classes at a local affiliate in an effort to get her focused back on training. I saw her this weekend for the first time in a few months—she looked great, and said she's never felt better. And neither of us counted any almonds, all weekend long.

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About the Author

Melissa Byers is a CrossFit Level I Trainer and Certified Kettlebell Instructor from Tilton, NH. She is currently in the process of affiliating, and she opened CrossFit 603 in March. You can read more about her CrossFit adventures on her blog, Byers Gets Diesel. Melissa still puts jelly on her eggs, even though it's not technically Paleo.