



Sarah Bentley, her parents, Steve and Debbie Hoffman, and her husband, David, have each lost at least 100 pounds since early 2014 – and kept it off. (Mark Mulville/Buffalo News)

Mom, dad, daughter and son-in-law each lost 100 pounds. Here's how.

By [Scott Scanlon](#) | Published July 20, 2018 | Updated July 20, 2018

David and Sarah Bentley don't mind saying this: They look better today than they did on their wedding day nearly nine years ago – and so do Sarah's parents, Steve and Debbie Hoffman. All four were overweight on that momentous occasion, and continued to gain weight for several years afterward.

The Hoffmans said they were fooled into thinking that the processed "health" foods they were eating were good for them. Four years ago, Steve weighed 400 pounds; his wife, 270 pounds. The Bentleys pushed into a life that would include two children. "We were the eat-out, take-out people. We never cooked," said Sarah, who weighed as much as her mom when she decided in early 2014 that enough was enough. Her husband weighed nearly 350 pounds. Each of the four Western New York family members has since dropped at least 100 pounds – 447 pounds in all.

They used a program called [Advocare](#) to shed weight, and recently were featured in the company's 25th anniversary issue magazine. Advocare is a multilevel marketing company with pitchmen that include New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees and other professional athletes. Such companies aren't for everyone, but the weight loss strategies in its business operations are cornerstones for many plans designed to help people lose weight. The family members recently talked about those strategies during an interview on the Bentleys' back porch on Grand Island.

Define your reasons



David and Sarah Bentley and Sarah's parents, Debbie and Steve Hoffman, left, have all lost a considerable amount of weight since the Bentleys were married almost nine years ago.

Sarah Bentley, now 31, was the first to decide she had to lose weight. She wanted to do it because she had been asked to be a bridesmaid in an upcoming wedding – "and I was sick and tired of being sick and tired." A friend introduced her to the weight loss program she chose. She understood that it would start with a 24-day "Jump Start" plan in which she'd have to give up her days of three extra-large double-double coffees and an everything bagel with cream cheese from the nearby Tim Hortons. Pizza, subs and sodas also would need to be put on hold.

She asked her husband – at the time an Orleans County correctional officer who drove 50 minutes each way to work – to join her. At first he chose to stick to his ways, which included many of the same things his wife ate, along with vending machine fare and three energy drinks before and during his overnight shifts. That changed when Sarah Bentley lost 18 pounds during her jump start – and 50 pounds in three months.

By then, her mother also took notice. Debbie Hoffman, 64, a registered nurse with Catholic Health, left her job amid struggles with rheumatoid arthritis. She'd also endured pain-easing injections and arthroscopic surgery on her left knee, as well as surgeries on both shoulders. "My weight was killing me," she said.

Her husband was the last holdout. The retired General Motors Powertrain worker at first balked at the cost of the weight loss process his family members undertook. That changed a few months later, when he could barely squeeze his 6-foot-2, 400-pound frame into an airline seat on a trip to Florida, as his thinning wife had no problem doing so alongside him. "We wanted to change everything," David Bentley said. "We were sick of the excuses, sick of looking the way we did, and we decided to make a change."

Get a plan

"In North America in general, 68 percent of people are overweight or obese with no plan in place," Bentley added. "I hate the word 'diet.' Diets are short-term. Diets fail. We wanted more than that." Their jump start plan focused on eating every two hours, including protein with every meal and snack. They also looked to avoid dairy and drink more water. They incorporated supplements for overall wellness and appetite control, including a multivitamin; fiber pills and probiotics for gut health; and filtered fish oil to prevent inflammation.

Sarah Bentley said her days would start with a plant- or whey-based protein shake, or omelet and fruit. A mid-morning snack included an apple with 2 tablespoons of peanut butter and nuts. Lunches and dinners involved brown rice, lean chicken and vegetables, or homemade burrito bowls. A veggie and hummus, or hardboiled egg or salad with protein, made for an afternoon snack.

"Most people who are overweight aren't eating the way they should be," Sarah Bentley said. "They're not eating every two or three hours. They're not eating the right things or they're not eating at all – until they binge out at night. They overindulge in the wrong things – dairy, heavy carbs, sweets. We're addicted to sugar and carbs. We tried to eliminate things in the beginning so we could moderately add them back in. When we did that, it was easier not to overindulge."

Eat a balanced diet



Sarah Bentley works out with some boxing drills with her personal trainer, Anita Hawley, on Grand Island. Bentley and her husband, David, both started working out in earnest two years ago when their weight loss efforts plateaued. (Mark Mulville/Buffalo News)

The new family diet consists mostly of seafood, lean white meat including chicken and turkey, eggs, and complex carbs you can find in fruits, vegetables and whole grains. These carbs are harder to digest than simple carbs, which flow more quickly into the bloodstream, spiking blood sugar and packing on pounds. "We tend to stay away from red meat because heart disease is the number one killer in North America and red meat is a huge part of that," David Bentley said. The Bentleys rarely eat after 7 p.m. and, if they do, it tends to be something small, always with protein, like peanut butter on a few carrot or celery sticks.

Portions count

"Now we can go out and eat fish, eat a couple of small potatoes and leave the rest of them on the plate," said Steve Hoffman, 66, who has lost 100 pounds, watched his blood sugar level fall below the diabetic range, been able to stop taking his cholesterol medication, and lowered his blood pressure. "You don't have to feel restricted but you do need to portion things," his daughter said.

Carol DeNysschen, a registered dietitian and chair of the Department of Health, Nutrition and Dietetics at SUNY Buffalo State, said portion control is key to weight loss and weight maintenance. She said a co-worker once spent a lot of money over the course of a year on [Nutrisystem](#), "but it taught her what a portion size was," and that had a helpful, longer-term impact.

Read – and understand – labels

"The things that are marketed to us as being healthy – for example, certain cereals, frozen and packaged meals, granola bars – were hurting us," Debbie Hoffman said. "Now we check the labels on everything we buy," said her husband.

DeNysschen recommended the 5-20 rule when reading labels. Look for numbers below 5 percent for unwanted nutrients, including saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, and sodium; seek numbers above 20 percent for healthier nutrients, including fiber, vitamins A and C, calcium and iron. Generally speaking, the fewer ingredients, the better, she said. She also urged label readers to avoid being tricked by unfamiliar names for unhealthy sugars.

Ingredients that end "ose" most often are simple sugars with no nutritional value; honey, maple syrup and molasses also are best avoided.

Drink right

The Hoffman and Bentley families strive to drink enough fluid each day that equates in ounces half of what they weigh in pounds. DeNysschen said most people should drink about eight 8-ounce servings of fluids each day. Those servings should include water, unsweetened flavored water, tea and coffee, as long as coffee doesn't make up the bulk of those liquids.

Sodas, fruit juices, power drinks and frappuccino are too packed with sugar, calories, caffeine, or all three, DeNysschen said, are best avoided for those who wish to lose or maintain weight. Alcohol should be avoided or consumed in moderation. "If I'm keeping up on my water," Sarah Bentley said, "that will help keep me full."

Crowd in the good stuff



David and Sarah Bentley have gotten creative with meal substitutions, including "breading" chicken breasts with crushed mixed nuts. See the recipe below. (Mark Mulville/Buffalo News)

The four have replaced processed white breads with whole grain and sprouted varieties, brown rice for white rice, and sweet potatoes for white potatoes. The family no longer deep-fries foods; they air fry them. Nut milks have replaced cow's milk. Ground nuts have replaced breadcrumbs. Avocados have replaced mayonnaise. The Bentleys no longer use soy sauce but Bragg's Liquid Aminos instead. They now make their pizzas at home – with cauliflower crust instead of white dough.

"We've made changes. When we go to pasta dinners we bring our own spaghetti squash," David Bentley said. "Will I have the five slices of DiCamillo's bread like I used to? No." "But we may have one," his wife said.

Fitness counts

"We still have goals," said Sarah Bentley, who has lost 105 pounds. "I want to be more toned now, and lose 10 more pounds." In early 2016, after their weight plateaued, she and her husband decided to transform their bodies in a different way, adding more muscle and strength. David Bentley – now a full-time Advocare distributor – began to work out at home and Catalyst Fitness at least three days a week; Sarah began a weekly three-day mix of strength training and cycling classes. Hikes have become routine family events for the Bentleys and their children, Landon, 9, Eva Lynn, 6.

David Bentley has lost 63 more pounds and gained 30 pounds of muscle since his workouts started – and 142 pounds since his weight loss journey began. Debbie Hoffman has gone from sitting in a chair – and often stopping during outings to catch her breath – to walking 5 miles on many days in her new Kenmore neighborhood. She regularly rides her bike.

"I really believe that 150 minutes of exercise a week works for the average person," DeNysschen said. "It doesn't have to be high intensity if you're not used to it. If you can just make it part of your daily schedule, so that if you don't do it by 8 o'clock at night, you think, 'I'd better go for my walk.' You can fit it in. Once you do this for three weeks in a row, it becomes part of your thinking process. We do things for our kids. Getting that little bit of daily exercise is what we do for ourselves."

Accept failure – short term

The four family members are grateful for the gains in energy, enthusiasm and well-being that came with their weight loss. They aren't finished yet. Debbie Hoffman would like to lose 20 more pounds; her husband, 50. "We still focus on our goals," Sarah Bentley said. "One off day isn't going to kill it. A vacation isn't going to kill it. We know how to get on track. Mindset is the main thing."

CONSIDER YOUR WEIGHT LOSS OPTIONS



Carol DeNysschen, a registered dietitian, shops with her children, Jenna, left, and Ashley for healthy school snacks at Orchard Fresh market in Orchard Park. (Harry Scull Jr./News file photo)

Not all weight loss and maintenance plans are the same but most follow basic tenets. Some also come with strings attached, so it's good to consider options and costs, said Carol DeNysschen, chair of the Department of Health, Nutrition and Dietetics at SUNY Buffalo State.

For those who are overweight, losing weight boosts physical and mental health, and increases life expectancy by lowering the risk of diabetes, heart disease and other chronic health conditions, DeNysschen said. All of this can create savings in the long run.

“A good part of the population can lose or maintain weight by eating whole foods and increasing their exercise,” she said. “That doesn’t work for everybody,” so trying different approaches, with the blessing of your health care provider, may be worthwhile.

Advocare is one of several multilevel marketing companies in the health and wellness fields in which distributors make money by selling products and recruiting other distributors to do the same. Distributors also can buy company products at reduced rates.

Pitches to prospective distributors can come with talk of making large sums of money for those who work distributorships hard, but Advocare, for example, reported in its official [2016 income disclosure statement](#) that 338 of its more than 570,000 distributors were paid more than \$100,000 that year, and 10,005 - or 1.7 percent – earned more than \$2,000. Yet to be sure, many of its weight loss principles have substance, DeNysschen said. The Bentleys and Hoffmans said they’re in the business to help others lose weight and improve health and wellness.

Free and low-cost advice on weight loss includes:

211 ([211.org](#)): This phone number and website can refer you to nutritional resources in your community.

Eat Smart New York ([eatsmartwny.org](#)): This state program is often run by county Cornell Cooperative Extensions, including in Erie and Niagara counties.

Food Bank of WNY ([foodbankwny.org](#)): The nonprofit teaches participants how to maintain a healthy lifestyle through comprehensive nutrition workshops, cooking classes, and more.

Dietetic help: [eatrightwnyda.org](#), [eatrightny.org](#), and [eatright.org](#), the regional, state and national dietetic association websites, offer recipes, dietary guidance and help finding a registered dietitian. "If you go to visit a registered dietitian," DeNysschen said, "it can be one visit and they will give you a plan."