

CAMP POCONO TRAILS 2011:
Counseling at a Weight Loss Camp

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Summer 2011 was a life changing experience, not only for the four hundred adolescents struggling with their weight, but also for me, a camp counselor and nutritionist at Camp Pocono Trails. During my stay at camp, I witnessed a population-wide cry for help.

The campers not only needed physical help to keep their weight in check, but many were also dealing with psychological issues, such as eating disorders, anxiety and depression. Over two month course at camp, I became part of a support system for an entire division of



teenage girls, ages sixteen to nineteen, as they developed both physically and mentally. An absolutely incredible and humbling experience.

The camp was divided into a boys' side and a girls' side, with thirty-five cabins each and interspersed between recreation halls, gymnasiums, barns, dance halls, etc. On the right is a photograph of my cabin (on a clean day!). This cabin housed my co-counselor, who specialized in tae-kwon-do, eight campers, and myself. On a typical day, a wake-up call would come over the intercom around 7:45, but in our group, we would be lucky to get the girls to open an eye by 8:10 to meet at the flag pole for line up by 8:15. As a nutritionist, I did not share the meals with my campers, but instead worked the food line, making food exchanges and answering any nutrition questions. After breakfast, two one-hour activity periods were scheduled.

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The options for activities were endless:

Banana Boat	Paddle Boat	Canoe	Kayak
Fishing	Power Walking	Water Aerobics	Free Swim
Boot Camp	Zumba	Turbo-kick	Kickboxing
Dance	Drama	Kickball	Softball
Soccer	Tennis	Gaga	Dodgeball
Calisthenics	Floor Hockey	Lacrosse	Wrestling
Weight Room	Nutrition	Climbing Center	Lineman
Ultimate Frisbee	Arts & Crafts	Tae-Kwon-Do	Basketball
Driving Range	Pilates	Glee Club	Be Your Best
Volleyball	Jet Ski	Xbox Connect	Ping Pong
Sand Volleyball	Water Basketball	Campus Laps	Nukum

Lunch was a similar process as breakfast, with each cabin sitting together, being served cafeteria style. With an only an hour rest period after lunch, everyone was back at an activity by 2:00. This first afternoon period was considered a choice time during



which campers could pick from a given set of activities to participate in. There was always a



snack after choice period before two more scheduled activity periods and shower hour. When everyone was cleaned up from working out all day, we went to dinner at 6:05. For the rest of the evening, beside evening activity, the campers were free to roam the majority of the grounds and socialize. Evening activity consisted of recreation hall events such as MTV night

with music videos performed by divisions of campers, the dating game, the bunk mate game, wacky tunes relay races, scavenger hunt, Simon says, or co-ed sports. This was a relaxing time with only snack left and curfew at 10:15. Yet, my days did not end there, as counselors were required to be on “watch duty” every other night to help ensure the safety and well being of the campers.

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Though the days were long and filled, the weeks flew by too quickly. During the regular camp session, I was a counselor in the oldest girls' division: super seniors. I had



absolutely no idea what to expect from them in regards to attitude, participation, and respect, but as it turned out, I could not have asked for a better group to work with. They may not have always cooperated and sometimes I would find girls sitting in the

back of aerobics classes crocheting or lounging, or I would find them skipping activities altogether and napping in the cabin instead. Since participation is difficult to enforce or force by this age, we were encourage and support the girls and lead by example and our own participation. These girls became more like friends to me than anything else. By the end, many had opened up completely and trusted me with their deepest secrets. Those were some of my most treasured moments: sitting on the porch of the cabins at night and keeping watch over the area, with a couple of campers sneaking out to sit and talk with me far past curfew. Serious situations were brought up, including family crises, difficulties with sexual orientation, lack of self esteem and self worth just to name a few. It felt good to share my own personal experiences, beliefs and show them my own perspective to help them cope or work through the challenges they were dealing with. When I left, a few of the campers wrote me letters detailing the impact I had made on each of their lives and thanking me desperately for my concern for them. I am very proud of this: being able to make a difference in an entire handful of young women's lives.

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All of the campers matured over the summer, but they also made drastic physical changes. As a nutritionist, I was not only in charge of facilitating meals, but I also had the opportunity to teach nutrition and cooking classes. The lead dietitian devised the menu, while the nutritionists had input on the lesson plans. The lesson plans for these classes



were fairly simple but definitely hit home for many campers. At the beginning of the summer, I would answer most of the questions proposed during lessons, but by the end, the class developed into more of a discussion, with the campers more involved and thinking more independently. During cooking classes, I was required to measure each camper in and out of camp. My jaw nearly hit the floor the first time I measured a camper out, for they had dropped multiple inches on every single measurement: chest, waist, hips, thighs, and arm. Obviously the hard work and dedication in both exercise and diet had paid off.

At the very beginning of the journal I kept through camp I had written: "...many of the girls' goals for camp have been 'to make my parents proud', 'to lose [number] of pounds', 'to be in love with the girl I see in the mirror'." I truly believe each and every single camper at Camp Pocono Trails reached their goal and I am thrilled to have had the opportunity to take part in such a life-changing experience.



The knowledge I have gained is invaluable and I will forever cherish my time spent at camp. Childhood and adolescent obesity continue to be areas of interest for me and I would like to pursue similar areas of prevention in this area in the future.

While at camp, I did witness several success stories among counselors who had previously been campers and made the lifestyle change, which does show success of some

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sort. Mostly I discovered that to treat overeating, or obesity in children and especially in adolescents, it takes a whole body approach. The physical, the emotional and the mental are equally important, as is the support system surrounding the person attempting to make these life changes.