

I-C-A-N!:

VETERAN DENNIS VERNAZZARO DISCUSSES HOW MOVE![®] HELPED HIM PUSH PAST WHAT WAS STOPPING HIM FROM BEING HEALTHY

“In my youth, when I weighed 227 pounds and had a 27-inch waist, it was easy to manage my weight because I was always active. But as I approached my forties, my weight started slowly going up. The years went by and I also began to develop knee pain that became so bad that I couldn’t exercise. I was later diagnosed with diabetes and before I knew it, I weighed 318 pounds and had a 56-inch waist!

My VA medical team kept telling me that I needed to lose weight, so I tried to do it on my own. I changed my eating habits and did what little exercise I could. I lost some weight, but just couldn’t maintain it.

In April 2009, I attended my first MOVE![®] class, weighing 271 pounds. I stuck with it even though the classes weren’t initially interesting to me, but 3 months later, I was up to 307.5! The turning point for me was when I met a fellow Marine who looked me in the eye and said, “You need to lose that gut!” Standing in front of him, in clothes that didn’t fit, I was truly embarrassed and knew he was right—I needed to get much more serious about losing weight. Even my pharmacist challenged me saying, “You can’t do this.” But I knew he, too, was pushing me to try.

It was about that time that I really started to listen to what the MOVE![®] leaders were saying. But more importantly, I started learning from other Veterans. They would bring in food labels that our dietitian would review with us; some group members would bring in food for us to try. I also found the group talk—discussing our weight each week, supporting one another, and soliciting suggestions to overcome challenges—to be really helpful.



I had the great support of my wife, Carol, who was doing WeightWatchers® herself, but also attended MOVE!® with me. Together, we learned to read the nutrition labels to make better choices, serve proper portion sizes when preparing meals at home, order lunch portions at dinner—then take half home—when we eat out. And we also park further away from things to get in extra walking!

One of the key changes I made was to eat the recommended portion sizes. This was an adjustment because I didn't realize how much I was eating at one sitting. Instead of eating the whole can of soup myself, for example, my wife and I now split the two servings. To supplement our meals, my wife adds lots of vegetables. I've also cut back on bread, and if I want to snack, I have 100-calorie snack packages. While in MOVE!®, I learned I could still eat what I love, just in smaller portions and maybe once or twice a month. I set small, achievable weight goals in a journey I now realize will last for years.

Getting physical activity was more challenging because of my knee pain, but I found other ways to do it. I started going to the VA pool to exercise with the kinesiotherapist. I've progressed from walking in the pool, to walking short distances, to riding a stationary bike. Before I knew it, I could walk without any pain in my knees, hips, or ankles! My endurance and strength had improved so much that I've started to track my exercise with a Fitbit® activity tracker, which I connect to my computer. I 'compete' with another Veteran who also owns one, and we follow each other's progress.

While running a race in my younger days, my coach told me to push past what was stopping me, and that's what I've done. I started MOVE!® almost 4 years ago and I continue to attend to this day. My weight's now down to 217 pounds and I have a 43-inch waist! And I'm back to my active daily lifestyle—walking 2-3 miles, doing 60 flights of stairs, and looking for other opportunities to add more activity!

An ex-Patriots quarterback once asked me what the last four letters of 'American' were, and I answered "I-C-A-N." Then he took out a coin and asked, "Do you choose 'heads', where you use your head and think of something to do, or 'tails' where you sit on your tail and do nothing?" For other Veterans trying to lose weight, I remind them that they are Americans who have a choice between heads and tails. Then they need to make the right choice and believe they can! I also tell them that they may not get much out of MOVE!® the first or second time—sometimes you need to hear the information again and again before you can truly absorb it. But if you stick with it and begin to make small changes, it will add up to big results!"