

The skinny on slimming down, Canadian-style

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Spring is the season for fresh starts and new beginnings, and the inevitable TV reminders to get off the couch and back into shape. The time to start that New Year's diet has finally arrived.

Losing weight has become a competition on American television, as most obviously exemplified by NBC's top-rated reality series *The Biggest Loser*, wherein overweight people suffer through the boot-camp experience with a \$1-million cash prize going to the contestant dropping the most poundage. The weight-game players of *Loser* starve themselves, swing from ropes and run wind sprints, while medics stand by.

In the past few weeks, the shape-up message has come fast and furious on U.S. daytime television, with dieting and workout segments on *Oprah*, *The View*, *Live with Regis and Kelly* and even *Dr. Phil*, who reminds us daily that bikini season is almost here.

And then we have the Canadian way, which naturally promotes a more sensible, and sensitive, approach to losing weight.

Canadian weight-loss programs have practically evolved into a separate TV genre in recent years, courtesy of the popular reality series *Taking It Off*, *The Last 10 Pounds Boot Camp*, *Bulging Brides* and *X-Weighted*, which began its third season last week. The great national slim-down continues with the new arrival **Stuck** (Wednesday, W Network at 9:30 p.m.), which shows that there will forever be strength in numbers.

Scheduled for 13 episodes, *Stuck* is a "docu-soap" that aims to inspire viewers. The series follows seven Toronto women brought together with the common goal of losing weight and getting their lives back on track. Everyone falls into a rut now and then. Sometimes all you need is a little push.

"There's no competition element on this show," says series producer Marianne Kushmaniuk. "The common thread is that each woman has tried to lose weight before and failed, but the support of a group makes a big difference."

The group of seven is introduced to viewers in the opening episode. There's nary a glamour girl in the bunch and no two are alike. Divergent in age and ethnicity, the women have signed onto the reality-style experiment for varying reasons.

Clarice, 52, is a former social butterfly who withdrew from friends as her weight rose; Nicole, 28, is a former competitive figure skater who knows she must lose weight to pursue an acting career; and the self-described "gym loser" Bonnie has diabetes and realizes she has to get off the couch in order to save her life. "Each woman has her own particular set of challenges and obstacles to overcome," Kushmaniuk says.

In the opening show, the women gather for the first of their weekly meetings. After hearing the results of their individual fitness assessments, they reveal their personal stories. One is embarrassed to admit she now outweighs her husband; another explains how she regards her outer appearance as a "shell." And yes, tears flow with the true confessions.

"The group format enables the women to articulate what was holding them back," Kushmaniuk says. "For most of them, it's a matter of finding time in their life to balance priorities." In the case of busy working mom Maxine, 41, it's about exercising and then feeling guilty about spending time away from her family.

Filmed over a three-month period, the series follows the group members from a respectable distance; it's not easy hitting the gym for the first time. Each woman received a proper nutritional plan and a personal trainer to supervise her new fitness regimen. And as the workouts increase in intensity, the bond within the group strengthens. "Eventually they become part of each other's lives," Kushmaniuk says.

The results of *Stuck* remain unknown, even to the producers: The final three episodes are still to be taped. So far, the process has yielded the normal human reactions expected with anyone making sweeping life changes.

"There have been breakdowns and breakthroughs," Kushmaniuk says. "Some people we thought would be strong weren't, while others have surprised us. But you won't believe the changes in the women by the sixth show."