

Stress-proof your slimming

It's toxic for your health and a major weight-loss saboteur. Here's how to get your stress levels under control and keep slimming when the going gets tough

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Have you ever felt you're in a catch-22 situation when it comes to stress? So often, the first things to go out the window when you're feeling under pressure are healthy eating and exercise. Yet eating well and staying active are two of the most effective ways of building up your resilience to stress in the future. So, given that one in five women feels her stress levels are out of control, and that stress is now the top reason for taking long-term sick leave, how can you break the cycle and protect your weight loss when you're up against it? We identified four common pressure points and asked the experts for their top strategies to help you stay on track.

PRESSURE POINTS

1 *'I always seem to be waiting for something to go wrong'*

Worrying about what might happen in the future, or torturing yourself over the past, creates the same physical reaction in the body as experiencing the event for real. 'Overthinking or ruminating can become a habit,' says clinical psychologist Dr Jessamy Hibberd, co-author of *This Book Will Make You Calm* (Quercus, £7.99). 'and it's one that creates constant underlying feelings of stress or anxiety.' You may not even be aware that your stress levels have gone up – until the scales have stuck. 'We know that stress hormones encourage weight gain in some people, especially around the middle,' says Dr Jacquie Lavin, Slimming World's head of nutrition and research.

✓ stress-proof solution

Schedule some daily 'worry time' – set aside 15 minutes in the evening when you think about your worries. 'It's a way of putting yourself back in control of your worries, instead of your worries controlling you,' says Jessamy. 'If something troubling comes up during the day, tell yourself you'll think about that at "worry time". Make a note of it if it helps, then distract yourself by doing some kind of exercise, reading a book or phoning a friend,' she suggests. When 'worry time' comes, take a pen and paper and separate your worries into two lists: one of the things you can do something

about, and one of those you can't. Aim to think of practical strategies to help deal with list A, and remind yourself there's nothing you can do to influence list B so it's best just to let go.

2 *'I rely on stress to get me through the day'*

Not all stress is negative – a short-term burst of stress hormones can be just what you need in a tricky or challenging situation. Stress was never meant to be our default state, though, says Jessamy. 'Chronic stress is very dangerous because it can become so much a part of life that you think feeling constantly uptight is totally normal.' Not only is it bad for your health, it can be a major weight-loss saboteur, convincing you that you 'need' to have that takeaway or extra glass of wine to wind down. 'It's also easy to think you simply don't have time for Food Optimising or Body Magic when you're under pressure – women especially will move themselves right down their list of priorities when they're busy,' says Jacquie.

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Taking mini stress-breaks throughout the day will make you more productive, and help keep you in control of your eating choices, says Jessamy. 'It's physically impossible to feel both relaxed and stressed at the same time – like sneezing with your eyes open – so learning how to chill out is an essential skill for everyone.' Try this simple

breathing exercise whenever you feel stress levels rising: put your left hand on your chest and your right hand on your tummy. Inhale for two seconds, exhale for four seconds, and pause for four seconds, breathing deeply enough so your right hand moves more than your left. Repeat. And while it's fine to plan your favourite treat for the end of the day, take some time to calm down first before you enjoy it. 'If you really savour your glass of wine or bar of chocolate,' says Jacquie Lavin, 'you'll be less likely to reach for another one.'

3 *'I just can't help worrying what people will think of me'*

Being self-conscious about your size can stop you doing all sorts of things – from exercising and making the most of your social life to enjoying new experiences and taking on fresh challenges. It can sometimes even stop you going to group if you've had a gain. 'There is no blame at group – no-one will ever judge you for a gain. Members have a habit of judging themselves, though, and feeling unnecessarily ashamed for having "failed",' says Consultant Dawn Breacher, who runs Slimming World groups in Shefford, Stotfold and Knebworth. According to US research professor of social work Dr Brené Brown, shame is one of the most stress-inducing emotions. So is it any wonder that, before long, you're fighting a powerful urge to soothe those feelings with food?

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Slip-ups are a part of every weight-loss journey, says Dawn. 'The most successful slimmers are those who've had gains along the way and used them as opportunities to learn something about themselves. So ask yourself, what can I learn from this? What can I do differently next time?' And the truth is, you will never be able to control what people think of you. 'In the end, it's what you think of you that's really

One slip-up doesn't mean your weight-loss has failed, yet under stress it can feel like it. So tell yourself how well you're doing – often. It works!

important,' says Jessamy Hibberd. So remind yourself on a regular basis that you're doing something amazing. 'Keep a list of all the reasons that you want to lose weight and be healthier on your phone so you can look at them whenever you need to,' adds Jessamy.

4 *'I'm feeling out of control and it's affecting my motivation to slim'*

Feeling overwhelmed or that you don't have time to do anything properly can undermine your motivation to Food Optimise – after all, if it's impossible to get it perfectly right, why bother? 'We know that stress can change the way we think, and make us more prone to negative thinking patterns such as an "all or nothing" approach,' says Jessamy. 'One slip-up doesn't mean you've failed, but when you're under stress it can feel like that.' What you say to yourself really matters, too – if you say 'I can't cope' often enough, you'll start to believe it.

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Exercise is one of the best ways to reduce stress hormones, boost mental well-being and help you feel more in control of your life,' says Jacquie. 'It will help boost your energy levels, too, which can become depleted when you're under stress.' It may be the last thing you feel like doing, but even a 10-minute walk around the block will help. As well as providing an instant hit of calming hormones, regular exercise helps the brain become more resistant to stress in the future, according to new research. And taking one day at a time and going back to basics, like keeping a food diary, can also help. 'The truth is you need Food Optimising more than ever when you're under pressure,' says Dawn. 'Staying in control of your eating can empower you and give you the self-belief to feel in control of the rest of your life, too.'



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