

Want to Lose Weight, Stress Less!

If you think weight loss involves just changing your diet and exercise habits, read on. You see, while healthier food choices and fitness certainly contribute to changing the way your body looks and feels, chronic, unmanaged stress plays a huge role in our weight loss efforts.

There are many ways stress affects your weight. The first way is by encouraging the intake of high sugar/high fat foods. This occurs because when you're stressed, you ignite the stress response within your body. When this occurs, biochemicals and hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline are released. These biochemicals increase the desire for foods high in sugar and fat. To add insult to injury, the weight that's gained as a result of this chemical release encourages the release of more stress hormones!

The next way stress causes weight gain is because many of us react to our stress by eating. It's called emotional eating and we've employed this behavior as a means to self soothe and self medicate. The way this occurs is that when we feel stress, we've decided that the best way to find relief is by eating to numb, calm or distract us from our stress. Of course it does nothing to solve the true problem but it's the behavior we've chosen to help us feel better. When we eat in response to stress, we typically reach for foods high in sugar to release a surge of serotonin; a "feel good" chemical within our bodies. While this may temporarily offer some relief, the payback is excess weight along with the problem that we're essentially laying the groundwork for illness and diseases such as obesity, metabolic syndrome (a precursor to diabetes), diabetes, hypertension and heart disease.

Another way stress causes weight gain is because chronic stress inhibits restful sleep. When we're tired or fatigued, we throw off our natural sleep cycle which increases the release of those damaging stress hormones. In an effort to increase our energy as a result of sleep deprivation, many of us also use sugar and caffeine for "instant energy." While the excess sugar supplies a quick energy fix, it's one of the quickest ways to gain weight because the foods we choose for an energy boost are usually calorically dense while being nutrient void. That means there's very little value, satiety or fullness coming from all of those calories.

Many of us choose caffeine for an energy boost when we're feeling fatigued. This gives you that feeling of being "tired but wired." While you may be able to stay up longer this way, it prevents your body from rebalancing and getting back to your normal sleep cycle. When this occurs, stress hormones continue to be released which causes further weight gain.

Stress also encourages mindless eating. What this means is that when we're stressed, we often grab whatever food is available or convenient. We become so preoccupied with our stress that we're not aware of thousands of extra calories we may be taking in. Also, when we're stressed, we may not want to deal with the extra thought required to preplan or prepare healthier food

choices. The stress we feel may be so consuming that we don't want the extra "work" of having to make healthy choices.

Finally, the weight gain you notice as a result of chronic stress makes you feel frustrated, discouraged and upset with the way you look. You also may feel angry or disappointed at the way you've chosen to handle your stress. For those us who are emotional eaters beware, because this is exactly the setup for another emotional eating binge. When we realize that we've spent years, maybe even decades handling our stress this way, we often come to the conclusion that "there's got to be a better way." While it's the first step in the right direction, it's an important first step to ending the battle how your stress leads to weight gain.

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