

Brain Tricks to Help You Lose Weight

REACHING YOUR HEALTH GOALS IS MOSTLY MENTAL—HERE'S HOW TO DO IT. *By Nicole Pajer*

Frustrated with your weight loss progress (or lack thereof)? Your brain may be to blame. Shedding pounds and keeping them off has less to do with the food you eat and more to do with what's going on in your mind, says Eliza Kingsford, author of *Brain-Powered Weight Loss*. "It starts with learning who you are in relation to your actions," says the psychotherapist who specializes in weight management. "What are your triggers? How do you manage cravings? How do you handle situations after you've gone off track? What are the messages that you tell yourself?"

Susan Peirce Thompson, PhD, adjunct associate professor of brain and cognitive sciences at the University of Rochester, agrees. "Getting your brain on board is an essential requirement for long-term weight loss," she says. "This is the piece that people are missing."

Here's how to make your brain your ally instead of a diet-sabotaging enemy:

Curb negative thoughts. Cognitive distortions, or "thoughts that create inaccurate or exaggerated pictures of reality," can wreak havoc on weight loss goals by affecting your feelings, which trigger behaviors. "Let's say you go to a party and see a beautiful girl and think, *I'll never look as good as her*," Kingsford says. "Then you go home and eat a pizza at 2 a.m. because now you feel bad about yourself—when you left the house feeling good."

To break the cycle, follow Kingsford's "Three Rs": **Recognize** a negative thought, **replace** it with something positive and **repeat** it. So instead of shaming yourself, say, "She's beautiful and so am I."

Think of your future self. Battling a big craving? Close your eyes and imagine yourself in the future, reaping the rewards of resisting—turning heads at your high school reunion or crossing the finish line of a challenging race. In his new book, *The Hungry Brain*, author Stephan J. Guyenet says that taking time for this

kind of visualization helps your rational brain's decision-making process, which can override in-the-moment impulses.

Keep trigger foods out of sight. A Cornell study found that women ate half as many Hershey's Kisses when they were in opaque containers on their desks vs. clear containers. "This is because the visual cues were not present," says Adrienne Youdim, MD, director of the Center for Weight Loss and Nutrition in Beverly Hills, Calif. You can make this work in your favor, too, by keeping healthy foods most visible in your kitchen.

Put meals in writing. "The average person makes 221 food-related choices every day," says Peirce Thompson. "There is no way that our willpower can execute in the face of that kind

of uncertainty." Try to remove choice as much as possible by planning meals and recording them ahead of time in a food tracker. "The next day, your only food job is to eat what you've planned out," Peirce Thompson says. If a whole day is daunting, start by pre-tracking the meal that gives you the most trouble, like dinner, and build on that.

Say an affirmation. It sounds corny, but it works: A study published in *Psychological Science* found that women dissatisfied with their size lost more weight after affirming their values. Kingsford suggests choosing a phrase that is positive, personal, pointed and in the present tense. For instance: "I have the power to change my lifestyle." Repeat it three times every morning.

Smell before you bite. "More than 90 percent of taste is smell," says Alan Hirsch, MD, founder of Smell & Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago. The neurologist conducted a six-month study where volunteers were given aromatic blends of scents like banana and green apple and instructed to smell them whenever they felt hungry. Those who sniffed more often lost the most weight. "By sniffing your food, odor molecules reach the olfactory nerve at the top of the nose, and you will therefore perceive that you've eaten more than you have," Hirsch says. Take note: Eating your food hot helps enhance the smell, while drinking alcohol with your meal has the opposite effect.

Expect to make mistakes. "Temptations will strike along the way," says Kingsford. But if you stray from your goals, it's important to get your brain back in the game as soon as possible. Resist the impulse to keep indulging. "Saying 'I'll start again Monday' can quickly become 'next week,'" she says. "Dieting is not all or nothing. Make sure you get back on track with your very next choice." ●

