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HL13

Mind Games For Better Health

how to outsmart your metabolism

For the sake of explaining my theory I'm going to concentrate on those who are carrying too much weight, because I know all about that from personal experience. Apologies to anyone who wants to gain a few pounds - I've never had the problem, so I'd rather not make suggestions in that area; but I would imagine some of these mind games could still work.

Anyway, have you ever wondered why health plans and diets don't seem to work? It's as if the one you are on was intended for a different kind of person. I mean, you'd have to think if you were paying a fortune for a solution to your weight problem, it really should deliver something positive. You have been taking these funny-tasting supplements, walking half-way round the known world twice a day and eating stuff that any self-respecting rabbit would ignore, yet the scales don't seem to take any notice. Your weight hasn't changed much and may even have gone up since you started! It's not fair. Surely there's something you can do to get on top of this problem? Actually, there may well be, and it's all in your mind.

The body, in particular the metabolism, is an amazing thing, a factory that never stops working to produce whatever is needed to keep you alive and kicking. Any substance that is ingested, whether by mouth or absorbed through the skin, is processed to extract some useful element that the body requires to function normally. A humble cookie contains fat, sugar (plenty of them!), plus cereal, fibre, perhaps trace elements and minerals and, if shop-bought, probably a few chemicals that will be listed on the packet by their numbers. As far as the metabolism is concerned, most ingredients are useful and it will decide on the waste factor - no need to explain how that works! You don't have to worry about keeping the machine working as long as you remember to stoke the boiler. What you shovel in and when is your choice, and here's where you can be the architect of your own destiny.

If I'm right and it takes a while for the metabolism to figure out what you are up to, any change of diet likely to produce an eventual loss of weight will cause a reaction in a matter of days. This is often when the withdrawal symptoms emerge - a feeling of emptiness and fragility, occasionally dizziness, eyesight not quite right, nerves on edge, plus any number of other strange reactions that could be allied to an illness of some kind. Although not the case, the effect is similar. The metabolism has had a word with the boss - the brain - and it has sent messages to organs, muscles and nerves, wake-up calls that something out of the ordinary is occurring and the owner of the body should fix it, pretty quick smart. That's when most of us cave in, usually with a binge that provides the metabolism with exactly what it has been craving during our abstinence. And what does it do with all this excess? You don't really need to ask, do you? It chucks it in the warehouse - around the waist, on the butt, on the thighs, anywhere that could do with a bit of supplementary padding. Actually, none of this excess fat is needed, but the metabolism has been doing the same thing with it for so long that it has become lazy and doesn't know any other way. Now's the time for you to take advantage with the mind games.

Let's assume you have found a diet plan that you think might work for you. It may call for the reduction of fat, sugar and carbohydrates. If it requires cutting out one or more altogether, unless there's a valid medical reason for this, I'd seriously reconsider. The total denial of a substance that has been a regular on the menu for years will be conspicuous by its absence and it will be like giving the metabolism a poke in the eye - you'll end up with an instant revolution that will cause you discomfort, pain and every reason to go back to your old habits. Far better to decrease these fat-producing elements over time, as recommended in the No-diet Diet (Healthy Living HL07). You can, however, still knock them down a bit immediately and get away with it by employing some in-house psychology.

So, it's on to low-fat meat, plenty of vegetables, salad and fruit - for big eaters of pasta and burgers that's punishment, and some! My advice is: don't pre-judge. Just bite the bullet and give it a go. Before you do though, the night before actually, when you've had your traditional feed-up and are absolutely bulging at the seams, jump on the scales. Whatever you have eaten will show up - it must. After all, three pounds of food in the stomach weighs exactly the same as carrying it in a bag. If your weight-increase from the last time shocks you, that's good - there's the incentive, plus a comforting hope that it won't be this way for long. Next day, start your diet and try to convince yourself that it's going to work. Even if you are low on will-power, tell yourself that you need to do this; and be happy - it's going to be fun. Put up with the deprivation for the entire day. Drink plenty of water or low-cal soup (Recipe R09) each time the hunger pangs nudge you. Make sure you have a good size meal in the evening as you normally would. This will settle the hunger and fill you up. The body expects this because it always gets loads about this time, and the stomach will already be producing the acids to deal with the influx. The only difference will be the kind of food because you have changed to the diet-type, something the metabolism will eventually figure out, but not right away.

Directly after your meal, try the scales again. Informed sources will probably tell you that checking your weight every day, sometimes more frequently than that, is the wrong thing to do. Their reasoning is that any ingested food takes a while to be processed, sometimes days, so a permanent change in weight won't show up immediately. Maybe not, but this isn't about what will happen in time: it's to do with now and how it makes us feel. We're dealing with the psychological aspect - the metabolism's and yours as well. As for the advice of the experts, if it was as good as they claim, it would have helped, not hindered. It is my contention that starving yourself for a week only to step on the scales to find nothing has happened is very likely to cause the diet to be abandoned. Seeing a similar result on a daily basis, however, is acceptable and can be a driving force. You see, nobody really expects much in a day or two, or even three; so any loss at all is a bonus, encouragement to keep on with the plan because this one might really work! An increase is perhaps disappointing, but it is tolerable under the circumstances and beneficial in a way - a timely warning to watch what you eat for at least another day to see how that affects the scales. Frequent checks may not tell the end of the story, but they can help keep you faithful while you're working towards it.

Okay, back to evening number one. You've had your first full diet meal and are standing on the scales staring down. Even if you have apparently put on weight, the stuff you have eaten will be metabolised eventually and won't be around forever - that is, as long as it didn't contain heaps of fat, carbs and sugar. In fact, much of it - the bulk of the vegies and fruit - is fibre and water, very little of which will be retained. Now, resist the temptation to eat more, go to bed and dream of the new clothes you are going to have to buy when the diet eventually kicks in. It will, but the full, lasting effect is going to take a bit more work than one day of depriving yourself.

Although those on a sensible weight-loss diet really are eating sufficient, the seemingly forever-hungry part is, I believe, why many elect to go with quirky diets that recommend some high-cal foods like bacon. Dieters love the stuff and if some nutritionist recommends it, why not? The answer to that is simple - it's loaded with fat, salt and preservatives. If you believe eating lots of fatty, salty foods is going to help you get healthy, you must be really desperate to keep the weight on; which, of course, you are not. If you really must have bacon, save it for the odd treat - that way you'll enjoy it more and it won't do you any harm. You can always try sticking to the lean cuts and boiling them in water for five minutes before frying in a non-stick pan - this will remove some of the fat and salt, and you might even discover it tastes better, different certainly. This should be another consideration for your new diet - variety, hopefully of the pleasant kind. If you make up some interesting combinations that prevent you from eating the same dishes day after day, you are less likely to get bored and the metabolism won't know what's coming. Be prepared, however, for a time of awakening. This might be around the third day when it is beginning to dawn that thoughts you had yesterday of being happy to eat this salad stuff ad infinitum isn't quite true. I can almost guarantee you will eventually be groaning at the prospect of what you are about to receive. And you won't be alone in this.

If you have reduced your fat intake, or maybe cut it out altogether, the body will initially ask politely for some, then start screaming for it. Resist surrendering by having the usual binge, but don't deprive the body either: give it a little of what it wants: perhaps a small bag of chips, a single cake, a low-cal pastry topping on the meat you were going to have with just a few green vegies - but that's all ! You should find the internal discomfort will lift or disappear, for a while anyway. That small amount of fat in the snack will have gone

straight to the storehouse because it is supposedly needed, despite the fact that this isn't true - there's plenty hanging around already in the form of lumps and bumps you are trying to get rid of. By providing just a tad, you may have added some to it, but nowhere near as much as you have been in the past, and it can be worked off during the day's normal routine exercise. The important thing is that the metabolism is satisfied for the moment, allowing you to carry on with your chosen diet plan.

The internal complaints will, of course, come again, maybe next day, certainly quicker than they did the first time - your metabolism is beginning to realise there's a deception going on here. At least it thinks there is; but you are smarter and in control. Next time it asks for goodies, you'll wait a bit, perhaps an hour or two, then give it some - same small amount as before. It may well complain later that day, but to no avail: you'll simply refuse and make it wait till tomorrow - or not, if that's what you decide. In effect, what you are trying to do is disrupt the metabolic pattern so that the body never knows what kind of food it is going to get, when, or how much.

Just so that you know I'm not merely speculating with this theory of mine, I have actually been testing it out myself. The fat is gradually disappearing, presumably thanks to the daily exercises (Healthy Living HL10), and I have been losing around a kilo (2.2 pounds) a month. At least, that is, until last week when it jumped back up more than I would have liked. Football was the reason - not playing, but watching it on TV. It never seems quite as enjoyable unless accompanied by a few drinks and snacks, all of which the metabolism swooped on like a seagull on a sick prawn! Needless to say, I wasn't proud of myself and made up my mind it was only going to be a temporary lapse. So, I went back to the diet. In just two days I'd knocked off the extra 4 pounds, a surprise in itself, but I was also pleased not to be experiencing those earlier withdrawal symptoms. The strategy, it seemed, worked even better by coming off the diet entirely for two or three days, then going back to it. Another thing I noticed was that I couldn't eat as much as I had in the past without feeling very uncomfortable. I put this down to my stomach shrinking. Whatever, it did mean that I was satisfied with just a few naughties instead of a whole heap. Presumably, my metabolism was happy too, because it didn't complain. From now on, this will be part of the mind games - stick to the diet, introducing the odd fatty snack, sometimes before it has been requested, then hop off the wagon once every two or three weekends as a reward for myself and to confuse the metabolism even further. I will, of course, keep checking the scales as a reminder to stick with the plan and return to it sooner rather than later - I don't want to have to start all over again!

No diet plan is going to work unless you do your bit. The longer the road, the harder it is to stay on it, so you need some incentive to persevere, a goal at the end that you can identify with. This may be getting back into clothes that are too tight; not feeling tired or breathless after only a short walk; perhaps reducing the incidence of and discomfort from sore joints and swelling in the limbs; or maybe just looking better in the mirror. These are practical targets that can be seen or felt and when, over a period of time, something positive is definitely happening, it has more meaning than graduations on the bathroom scales. Not only do we feel better in our bodies, but having to tighten the belt another notch to stop the jeans slipping down is a psychological boost worth its weight in gold. We are pleased with our effort, and at long last we are starting to feel good about ourselves. I believe this rise in self-esteem is far more important than may be realised. It is a part of the mind games that you will enjoy the most - the certainty that you are winning.

One of the greatest obstacles to a healthy lifestyle in general, and dieting in particular, is everyday life and the established routine. Anyone who regularly has a full day is going to find even a simple change hard to integrate. If any switch is regarded as a troublesome - or worse still, a pesky nuisance - a number of side-effects come into play. Whatever would normally take place at the time allocated for the change will have to be adjusted; occasionally it may be necessary to re-shuffle when and how the usual things are done. The new introduction could take longer than anticipated, causing the need for more re-organisation. Some special item not readily available may have to be acquired or purchased - more inconvenience. Add to this calorie-counting. Not only is it tedious, but it can also result in an adverse psychological reaction. Weighing this and watching that is a bit like dining out on a fixed budget - you know what you really want, but you can't afford it! All of these, and more, tend to make us think twice - is it really worth it?

Believe me, it is, but it will take some sacrifice. Your body needs exercise on a daily basis to keep the muscles in shape, the joints supple and to burn off excess fats and sugars. A 20-30 minute walk each day

gives the metabolism another reminder to supply energy to perform the task; and as you and your diet have stopped with the charity donations, it has to draw on the resources at its disposal, namely the fat reserves in the storehouse. Many of those who take up diet plans expect them to do the job for them, but the change in eating habits will only prevent less fat being hoarded. Lolling in a chair with feet up in front of the TV or reading a book isn't going to get rid of what's already there! Find time for genuine exercise. Make it an essential like cleaning your teeth. You'll feel better for it and the diet will work in conjunction with it. Try to have just one main meal a day whenever it best suits. Other meals such as breakfast and lunch should be much lighter. If you can't get through the day without a snack or two, try unsalted, unroasted nuts (unless you have an allergy). Just a few on odd occasions will give the stomach juices something to gnaw on, but they take quite a while to digest and, as long as you don't pig out, they won't affect your diet or ruin the evening meal. Then, of course, there's fresh fruit. Even some processed snacks like rice crackers aren't too bad, although I often wonder about the preservatives and chemicals put in them.

The secret is not to stretch the stomach by loading yourself up with those 'tween-times nibbles. Fizzy drinks of any kind are really a no-no. The trouble with these is that they are mainly water (even beer) which is removed quite quickly, along with the gas. All you are left with is an empty space that requires filling almost immediately. As for the sugar content, it will stack on the weight. And don't think diet soda is an acceptable alternative - chemical sweeteners have been claimed by some to increase stress levels and affect behaviour, especially in children. Adults have enough to worry about as it is - they don't need to be bouncing off walls too! Get onto drinks like 100% fruit juice, milk, or vegetable soup. They will stem the hunger, fill the gap and, because they contain actual foodstuff, they give the stomach acids something to work on rather than continuing to gurgle away producing indigestion (maybe that should really be UN-digestion!).

As I've said before, and I'll say it again, you have to want to do this, for whatever reason. If the constant desire is in your mind, is even becoming a desperate yearning, listen to it. This is one wish that can easily be turned into a game you can play and eventually win. The bottom line is: you can make it happen; once you find the way that works for you. Keep this in mind.

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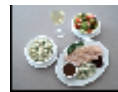
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