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FESTIVE FEASTING: HOW NOT TO OVEREAT THIS CHRISTMAS

Food addiction isn't something that just goes away. Success requires strategy

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You know the feeling. One bite of [insert special Christmas food here], and you've plowed through half of it. How did that happen? At the 2020 Truth About Weight Loss online summit, I confirmed that food cravings and overeating aren't just about willpower. According to Dr. Pamela Peeke, physician, scientist and expert on food addiction, this battle runs much deeper.

Our brains are wired to crave sugar and processed foods. The result? An endless cycle that leaves you feeling defeated and out of control. But there's hope. Dr. Peeke offers insights on how to break the cycle, reclaim your health and live life on your terms.

Science of food addiction

Imagine your brain as a finely tuned instrument. It rewards you with feel-good chemicals when you eat something nourishing, like an apple or a handful of berries. But processed foods? They hijack that system. Dr. Peeke compares processed sugar to a science fair project gone wrong. When you eat it, your brain's reward center goes into overdrive, craving more and more to feel the same rush.

"Processed sugar is more addictive than cocaine," Dr. Peeke explains. It overstimulates the brain, creating a tolerance. One cookie isn't enough. You need five. Maybe 10. And while this spiral continues, trauma and stress fuel the fire. Food becomes a quick escape, a way to numb the pain.

So can we outlaw junk food? Not quite. The solution isn't banning sugar or processed foods. After all, some people can have just one cookie and move on with their lives. (Lucky!) Instead, Dr. Peeke suggests making healthier options more accessible. Imagine a world where restaurants served only delicious, nourishing vegan meals, and reaching for whole foods was easier than grabbing junk.

Until then, start with simple swaps. Dates, figs, carrots and bananas can satisfy your sweet tooth while retraining your taste buds. Give it time, and soon enough, that soda you used to love will taste like syrupy chemicals.

Is it all in your genes?

Maybe you've heard about the obesity gene. Dr. Peeke assures us that just because you have it doesn't mean you're doomed. "Genes load the gun, but lifestyle pulls the trigger." You have the power to influence how your genes express themselves. It's called epigenetics, and it's a game changer.

The bottom line? You're not helpless. Every healthy choice you make strengthens your ability to overcome genetic predispositions.

One of Dr. Peeke's favorite strategies? Time-restricted eating. Think of it as giving your body a chance to tidy up after a long day. By leaving 12 to 14 hours between your last meal and breakfast, you allow your body to initiate autophagy, essentially a deep clean for your cells.

The key? Stop eating by 8 p.m. and let your "housekeeping crew" get to work. Start with a 12-hour fast, then gradually extend it to find your sweet spot.

Food addiction isn't something that just goes away. It's like a sleeping dragon; you don't want to wake it. Dr. Peeke shares that addiction can skip generations. Maybe your parents had no issues with food, but your grandfather was an alcoholic. The patterns are there, even if you can't always see them.

So, how do you keep the dragon asleep? By being honest with yourself. If certain food leaves you feeling shame, guilt or completely out of control, it's probably best to avoid it. Dr. Peeke likens it to a peanut allergy; it's not about fairness. It's about knowing your limits and respecting them.

Plan, prepare and pivot

"Failing to plan is planning to fail." Heard that one before? It's true. Success requires strategy. Dr. Peeke suggests setting daily goals and creating incentives. Use apps like Streaks to track your progress. Build momentum by focusing on consistency, not perfection.

Take a page from comedian Jerry Seinfeld's book: He writes every single day, even if it's nonsense. Just don't break the chain; every small step you take adds another link.

As for exercise, it doesn't have to be a grand event. Start with 3,000 steps a day. Didn't die? Great. Add another 1,000 tomorrow. Movement is medicine. It lowers stress, boosts mood and helps your body function at its best.

And if you're waiting for motivation to strike? Spoiler: It won't. Dr. Peeke's advice? "Thanks for sharing. Now get up and move."

We're all in recovery from something: a tough childhood, a toxic job, or a rough relationship. Think of your health journey as part of that process. Wake up each day with gratitude. Focus on strengthening your resilience. Life will throw curveballs; your job is to adjust, adapt and keep going.

Recovery isn't about perfection, it's about progress. Even if you relapse, it's not the end. Get back up, dust yourself off, and keep moving forward.

So, what's the truth about weight loss according to Dr. Peeke? "You are exquisitely powerful. You can change the way your genes express themselves with healthy lifestyle habits. Be willing to do the work it takes to build the life you deserve."

So show up, every day. Make choices that honor your health, even over the holidays. Remember: the only place success comes before work is in the dictionary.