- Eating customs

Creating a healthy relationship with food

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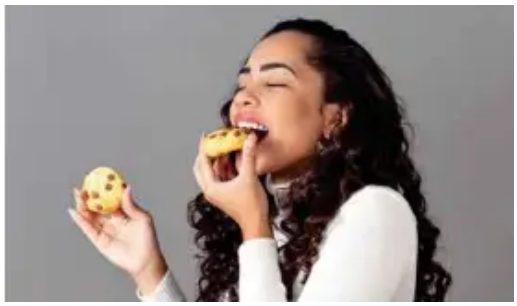
When people think about weight loss, they often focus on calories, workouts, and meal plans, but the most powerful weight loss tool isn't in your kitchen or at the gym, it's in your mind.



There are multiple thinking habits that people adopt that create an unhealthy relationship with food, hinder weight loss, and interfere with fitness goals. One of the main ones is 'all or nothing thinking'.

In a famous study by Herman and Polivy, people were labelled as either dieters or non-dieters based on a questionnaire. They were given either no milkshake, one milkshake, or two before a supposed ice cream tasting. You would think the more milkshakes someone had, the less ice cream they'd want, but that's not what happened. Dieters actually ate more ice cream after having milkshakes. This was called the "what-the-hell" effect: once they felt they'd messed up their diet, they gave up and kept eating. It's the mindset that says, "I ate one cookie, I ruined my diet, so I might as well eat the whole pack."

This mindset stems from perfectionism as well as low selfesteem. When we 'mess up' our diet, we are often extremely self-critical of ourselves and it can trigger a sense of failure and loss of control, leading to bingelike behaviour. There are multiple strategies to break out of this thinking habit.

1. Reframe slip-ups: One cookie doesn't cancel out your progress. Move on without guilt.
2. Practice self-compassion: Speak to yourself as you would a friend and realise that mistakes are part of learning.
3. Practice flexible thinking: Instead of strict rules, such as "I can't eat sugar", try saying "I'm choosing to eat less sugar because it helps me feel better." Restrictive language sets unrealistic expectations and makes us want to rebel. For individuals that need extra support, therapy can help identify and change the thought patterns, emotions, and behaviours that drive eating habits and can provide tools to manage emotional eating, build self-compassion, and create sustainable, healthy habits.