- Weight loss / Carbohydrates / Sleep

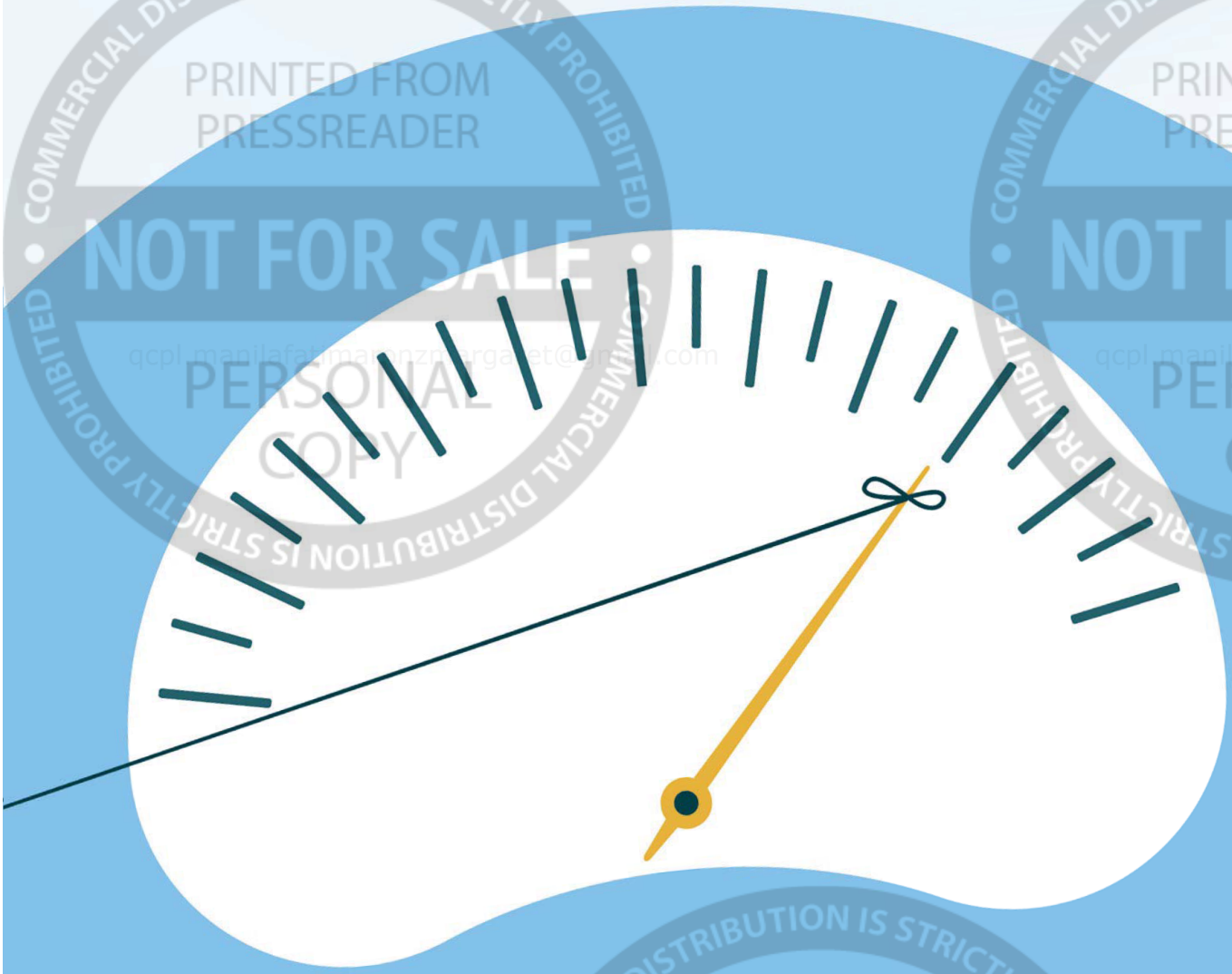
OVERHAUL YOUR WEIGHT LOSS STRATEGY

Looking to slim down? The most effective thing you can do for your body – and for your mind – is to shift the way you think about food.

BY LISA BAIN



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There's a saying:

"IF NOTHING CHANGES, NOTHING CHANGES."

That's true when it comes to losing weight – no kilos will be dropped if you don't adjust your lifestyle – but it's also correct when it comes to how you approach weight loss in the first place. If you aren't happy with your past experiences, thinking about it the same way you did before won't get you to a new place.

Considering what you eat is at the crux of slimming down, but it's your feelings about food that really drive how you eat. "Food means so many different things to people," says eating behaviour expert Anne Poirier. "Food can be love, it can be family, it can be rebellion." Her goal is to help people recognise their relationship with food in order to make lasting change. "How do you create a friendship with food where it becomes something that works for you rather than against you?" she says.

And when you finally see eye to eye with food, the benefits will reach far beyond just losing weight: Eating in a healthy, nourishing way is good for your heart, brain, muscles and immunity. If you're ready for change, these fresh ways of thinking over the page will help you make real progress. ►

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Don't be scared of fat

Of course, there are healthy and not-so-healthy fats, but the nutritious ones are good for your heart, brain and more. Fat and fibre both slow down the emptying of food from your stomach, Elizabeth says, which helps you feel fuller and more satisfied. Salmon is a great example of a powerful protein-fat combo; nuts are, too. "They were labelled evil at one point because they're high in fat," Elizabeth notes, "but now we know it's the healthy kind." Consider a pecan-crusted salmon, she suggests, for double the benefits. Avocado, seeds, olive oil and other fatty fish, such as herring and mackerel, are also smart sources of healthy fats.

Remember that you can be healthy at any size. When you focus on the foods you're eating and what they do for you (and don't), you set yourself up for mind and body wellness. Make these your new what-to-eat guidelines:

Focus on protein

"Like fibre, protein naturally helps you feel full by influencing the production of satiety hormones," says dietitian Karen Ansel, author of *Healing Superfoods for Anti-Aging.* "It takes a long time to digest, so you're less likely to grab a snack after a protein-rich meal." And protein doesn't just equal meat or dairy, says dietitian Elizabeth Huggins. "Those are excellent sources of protein, but there are a lot of plant-based proteins that are healthy things to eat." So, keep foods, such as beans, tofu, peas, nuts, seeds and grains, in mind.

GET ENOUGH FIBRE IN YOU

Fibre has superpowers for your overall wellbeing: There's evidence that it supports your metabolic health, can protect against cardiovascular disease, may reduce inflammation and more. And when it comes to losing weight, "fibre helps in so many ways," says Karen. "For starters, it expands in your gut and helps you feel full longer. Plus, the latest research shows it has a beneficial impact on good bacteria that helps produce gut hormones that tell your brain you've had enough to eat."

CUT DOWN ON SUGAR

"It's unclear whether sugar in and of itself makes you gain weight," says Karen. "But one thing is for sure – it tends to travel in foods that have way too many kilojoules and zero or few nutrients." Elizabeth suggests starting by cutting back on the heavy hitters, such as sugary beverages: soft drinks and fancy coffee drinks. One way to think about sugar, she says, is to "imagine a little packet of sugar – or about 4g of added sugar. So, when you look at a product that has 48g of added sugar, it can be helpful to consider that you'd be consuming about 12 packets." But, she adds, "don't get crazy thinking that every little gram of sugar is going to do you in, because you have to have an overall balance." If you love dessert, try having a small portion. "Sit down, slow down and enjoy every bite in a mindful way," Elizabeth says. "This can help you learn that you can have a smaller amount and savour it rather than eat a giant dessert and remember only the first few bites."

Rethink your drinks

We're talking about not only soft drinks and sugary coffee drinks, but energy drinks and commercial protein shakes, too. Limiting them isn't just a simple way to take in fewer kilojoules overall: Drinking kJs rather than eating them is less satisfying and doesn't lead to the same feeling of fullness, research shows. (Note that this doesn't mean to turn to diet soft drink instead – several studies have linked them to weight gain.) Water is a terrific option, of course, but if you find that boring, Elizabeth says, "try cucumber-mint water. It adds a nice essence."

CONSIDER HOW YOU EAT



While food choices certainly matter, there are also smart ways to improve your relationship with food. These simple ideas will help keep eating pleasurable:

HONE IN ON PORTIONS

When you're eating at home, serve yourself food using smaller plates and bowls. "It makes a huge difference," says Anne. This may trick your brain into thinking that you're chowing down on more than you actually are, and you'll likely take in fewer kilojoules, with less chance of feeling deprived. Eating out can be a tougher challenge, given the typically larger serving sizes in restaurants, so, before you go, think about how you'll handle it. You can order an entrée and a salad instead of a starter and a main; you can split a meal with a friend; or you can ask for a takeaway box right up front and stash half your meal before you dig in. ►

HEALTHY HACKS

Level up your nutrition with these pointers.



ADD GREENS TO SMOOTHIES

Elizabeth suggests starting with unsweetened plant milk or cow's milk, adding some frozen strawberries and half a frozen banana, then tossing in some fresh spinach. To make it easy, buy a bag of prewashed spinach leaves, separate them into resealable bags and then place these in the freezer with the fruit.



THINK BEYOND VEGIES AT DINNER

Work them in other places, says Elizabeth, like breakfast. "Consider zucchini bread or an omelette with mushrooms and capsicum."



PREP YOUR SNACKS

Nuts, healthy grain crackers, precut vegies and fruits – whatever your favourite snacks are, portion them into mini containers when you bring them home from the shops. That way, you'll make it easy to grab one whenever you're feeling peckish.



ADD THESE TO YOUR GROCERY LIST:

Greek yoghurt: Put it into smoothies or overnight oats, or replace the mayo in a chicken or tofu salad. Hello, protein!

Sweet potatoes: Bake a few in the oven, put them in the fridge and then heat up after work.

Canned beans: Look for low-sodium ones; mix into soups and stews, or even blend white beans into delicious smoothies.

Wholegrains (eg farro and barley): Prep in advance, top with a protein and roasted vegies in a bowl, or mix into soup for added texture.

Eat more mindfully

Another part of slowing down, Anne points out, is to eat with fewer distractions. Studies have shown that when we're distracted, we tend to eat more. "And it's more satisfying when we're paying attention," she says, "because we're noticing what we're eating, we're noticing the taste and our brain is getting satisfied, too. We're more content with the eating experience." So, put away your phone, turn off the TV and focus on the food.

Slow down and listen to your body

"I think we've been disconnected from our hunger," says Anne. "It's important to get back to listening to our body. What does hunger feel like for me? What is it I want right now – what will satisfy me? How full do I want to feel? How full is uncomfortable for me? Also, we tend to eat so fast that our brain doesn't get a chance to register that we're full. It takes about 20 minutes for leptin, the hormone that tells us we've eaten enough, to signal our brain that we're getting full. So, if you've finished your meal in 15 minutes, you may realise 10 minutes later that you've eaten beyond a comfortable level of fullness." It makes sense to pump the brakes a bit while you're noshing and let your brain catch up with your mouth.

Try these suggestions from Anne:

> Eat with your non-dominant hand – it'll automatically slow you down.

> After a few bites, put your fork down to really savour all the flavour you're tasting, then take a sip of water.

> In your mind, divide your meal in two; when you're halfway through, take a break, drink some water, chat with whomever you're with. And, before you dig into the second half, take note of how full your body feels.

Look at your patterns

"Study after study has shown that writing down what you eat is one of the most effective weight-loss tools out there," says Karen. "You can do that in a journal, using the notes app on your phone or on a wellness app."

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BE PREPARED

"Set up your environment for success," says Anne. "What foods can you prep and have ready to eat in your environment? Can you prep some little bags of food with fruit, vegies or some cheese? Also ask yourself, What foods might not be good to have in the house? I'm not saying these foods should be off-limits – it's just if you want that particular food, you'd need to go out and get it." Adds Elizabeth: "To make it easier to eat healthfully, ensure that certain kitchen gadgets, such as a blender for smoothies, are easy to get to. Don't put the healthy foods you want to consume more of on a bottom shelf where you'll have to rummage around and search for them."



PHOTOGRAPHY: ISTOCK

Whole-body wellness contributes to healthy weight loss in very practical ways. Here's how to make sure you're doing the most you can for yourself:

Prioritise sleep

Sleep deprivation can lead to weight gain, and it comes down to hormones: Sleep-deprived people produce more ghrelin, an appetite-stimulating hormone, and less leptin, the hormone that tells you that you've eaten enough. There's also evidence that the overly sleepy eat more kilojoules and more comfort-food carbs. And when you're exhausted, your impulse control can take a dive.

Breathe

When you're stressed, your levels of the hormone cortisol spike (it's that fight-or-flight response). "The rise in cortisol can trigger an increase in ghrelin," says Anne. "It also slows down insulin production, which may impact the cells' signal for more energy." To avoid that adverse chain reaction – and to protect your health in so many other ways – take time each day to do something to lower your stress level, whether it's meditation, exercise or getting immersed in a good book.

REASSESS THE SCALE

Consider how you feel about weighing yourself, says Anne. "If the scale isn't moving the way you want it to, there may be a tendency to just say, 'It doesn't matter anyway' and give up," she adds. "If stepping on the scale alters your mood, if your behaviours change due to the weight indicated on the scale, look at other success measures instead: How do your clothes feel? Are your joints less achy? Are you sleeping better? Are you moving more, and more easily? How are your numbers, such as your cholesterol and blood sugar?" There are emotional signals of success, too: "You're happier and laugh more. You're more alert and less irritable, less moody. You feel better about exercising."

Looking at your successes beyond the scale, at other pay-offs of healthy eating, can be very empowering, says Anne. "We don't have as much control over the weight on the scale as we do about our behaviours. It's really about, How am I eating? What am I eating? What's my relationship with food? How am I feeling about my body? You can't hate yourself into healthy behaviour. It's so important to be more compassionate with ourselves while we're on a journey to better our health." P