

Outwit the Leading Weight-Loss Traps for Guys

By: David Schipper

In prehistoric times, you would have emerged from a cave to survey the landscape for food. For survival, your brain would have urged devouring anything you could kill or uproot. Yet, when you weren't out hunting sloths, you would have become one for similar reasons. "When we didn't need to get food, we saved energy," says Paul M. Thompson, M.D., director of the preventive-cardiology program and of cardiovascular research at Hartford Hospital, in Connecticut. "That was how you survived—you didn't waste energy."

See how that survival hardwiring would be a one-way ticket to a [blubber belly](#) today? Whether you're in a supermarket or a restaurant, your brain still tells you to eat whatever you can lay your hands on. Once you've filled your [stomach](#), it still seduces you into kicking back, a decision made easier by Barcaloungers and big-screen TVs. So in the deepest recesses of your noggin, dieting and burning off pounds will need to override 40,000 years of evolutionary programming.

What will your brain do when you ask it to betray itself? Here are the six dieting traps most likely to trip you—and ways to [avoid](#) them.

Social Situations

"Our patients talk about [people pressuring](#) them to eat because they think they're not enjoying themselves," says Martin Binks, Ph.D., director of behavioral health at the Duke Diet and Fitness Center. Plus, men are expected to eat up, having been raised to equate manhood with a big appetite, adds Lisa Dorfman, Ph.D., R.D., a licensed psychotherapist and a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association.

How to avoid it: Have your comeback ready: "I can't eat because I had a [big meal](#) an hour or so before I got here." Or, "After I leave here, I have a date with an amazing woman I just met, so I don't want to fill up here first."

Bonus tip: Nibble on [appetizers](#) like you'd sip a cocktail. Others will see that you're holding something, derailing the "Why aren't you eating?" issue. Plus, you'll feel fuller.

Your Wife or Girlfriend

When you shape up, your [better half](#) suddenly has a choice: undertake a transformation of her own, or inadvertently sabotage yours. Many times she'll choose the latter, often subconsciously. After all, the better you look, the more other [women](#) will be checking you out. "'Sabotage' is a very strong word, but she really will ask you to go to the store more often for cookies and other things she wants," says Valerie Berkowitz, M.S., R.D., a nutritionist at the Center for Balanced Health, in Manhattan. "It's a sign that she misses

your old life, the one where you always ate bad food together and had fun doing so."

How to avoid it: Compromise. "If she insists on going out for pizza, have a few slices each instead of polishing off an entire pie," says Christopher Mohr, Ph.D., R.D., whose doctoral research focused on behavioral weight loss.

Bonus tip: "Include her by suggesting that she work out with you," says Mohr. "Find mutually enjoyable activities, so it doesn't come across as 'You're fat, so work out.'"

Thinking You're Thin

After interviewing thousands of people, a team of Dartmouth brain researchers led by Putnam Keller, Ph.D., determined that women use anxiety and fear to help them reach goals. So they count calories and stick with gym schedules. Men, on the other hand, rely more on hope, which makes it harder for them to stick with diets. "Hope seduces men into mentally enjoying a desired future in the here and now before attaining it," says Keller. This keeps us from sacrificing.

How to avoid it: Take a picture. Two-thirds of adult Americans are overweight, yet only 40 percent believe themselves to be too fat. "When people think of obesity, they think of the extremely obese, like 400 pounds or so," says Kimberly Truesdale, Ph.D., lead author of a University of North Carolina study that found that only 15 percent of obese adults recognize how heavy they are. "Your reflection in a mirror won't always register in your brain, but a picture will," says Berkowitz.

Bonus Tip: More than three-quarters of successful dieters cite a single emotional or physical incident that prompted them to get healthy, according to the National Weight Control Registry. Recognize yours when it comes.

Giving in to Stress

Stressed-out guys are more likely to binge eat because of a brain hormone called corticotrophin-releasing factor (CRF), according to Georgetown University research. The study, published in the journal BMC Biology, found that when rats' brains have levels of CRF comparable to amounts found in stressed humans, the rodents' cravings for sugary treats and other rewards triples. "This traps individuals into chasing incentives they could normally resist," the study authors say.

How to avoid it: Breathe more slowly and deliberately. "Use breathing to interrupt unhealthy thoughts before they become reality, so you give yourself a window of choice," says Grant Sutherland, A.P.H.P., a licensed hypnotist and founder of SlimClinics, a division of Keystone Wellness, which specializes in emotional eating and obesity. Feel a binge coming on? Focus on the center of your chest and, for 1 minute, make your inhalations and exhalations last 5 seconds apiece, which will slow you down. It might sound simplistic, but it actually works. "Your breathing will cause your mind to relax, no matter how stressed your body is," Sutherland advises.

Bonus tip: Sit next to Natalie Portman, or at least imagine her at your side. Chances are

you'll eat with better manners (and hence more slowly) than if you were sitting on the sofa in your boxer shorts.

Being a Perfectionist

An all-or-nothing approach to weight loss is a prescription for disaster. "We feel so completely defeated when we fail that it can take us away from the plan entirely," says Warren Huberman, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at the NYU school of medicine who works with patients through the university's program for surgical weight loss.

How to avoid it: Make dieting seem less onerous by giving yourself permission to slack off once in a while. Berkowitz suggests allowing one-fifth of your consumption to come from nondiet foods. This means you can cheat every fifth meal each day, or cheat all day every fifth day—whichever option fits best with your lifestyle. "If you're doing a good job of sticking to your diet, let the foods you're craving be a reward by scheduling them into a meal," says Joshua Klapow, Ph.D., a psychologist at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Bonus tip: Ask yourself what you'll look and feel like 5 years down the road, and how that will affect your family. Then write out your answers. "Motivation levels go way up when you do that," says Klapow.

Setting Unrealistic Goals

If you want to lose weight, you need to set a goal. But aim for something too big and you're sure to fail. Something too easy, and it won't feel like an accomplishment. Here's how to set and achieve all your weight-loss goals:

1. Set an optimal goal, a fairly ambitious goal, and a minimum goal. This will give you some latitude in defining success. "Men want to think that everything will go along as planned," says Martin Binks, Ph.D., director of behavioral health at the Duke Diet and Fitness Center. "By giving yourself several options, you'll always be on track, even if you've only reached the minimum."

2. Stop thinking you have to slim down overnight. Instead, set incremental goals, such as trying to lose a pound this week, which will lead you to change your habits. At the end of the week, reset. Always keep your goals right in front of you, and measure them in days or even weeks.

3. Ignore "before" and "after" advertisements common in most bodybuilding magazines. This won't come as a shocker, but a study in the journal *Eating and Weight Disorders* found that these comparison ads raise unrealistic expectations.

4. Don't focus exclusively on one goal, including a diet. "There needs to be time when you're not the person who is trying to lose weight; when you're just a guy," says Binks. Have a life.

5. Lose just 5 to 10 percent of your body weight. According to researchers at the Mayo

Clinic, this can eliminate the need for high-blood-pressure meds, cut your diabetes risk by 58 percent, reduce your heart-disease risk by 4 percent, and lower your odds of having sleep apnea.