

Head Game

The secret to shedding flab is all in your brain BY BRANDON GUARNERI



➔ You obviously need to work hard and stick to a good diet if you're trying to change your body. But there's a lot more to dropping pounds than eating healthy and working out hard. How you mentally approach training and mealtime can have a profound effect on your overall success. The next time any of these thoughts cross your mind, here's how to reprogram your brain for leanness.

1 **YOU THINK I DESERVE A REWARD EVERY DAY.**

REALITY CHECK: You don't. "Cheat days should be the carrot at the end of your week," says Jim White, R.D., owner of Jim White Fitness Studios in Virginia Beach, Va. "When you're having one every night or after every workout, it's a problem." White believes rewarding yourself for workouts can become habitual, locking you in a cycle of poor nutrition and self-loathing. "You feel guilty, then you get depressed, then you do it again."

YOUR MOVE: Focus on how good working out makes you feel instead, and make that your reward.

2 **YOU THINK I CAN EAT MORE WHEN IT'S "DIET" FOOD.**

REALITY CHECK: You can't. "If we think of something as being healthy, even if it isn't, we usually give ourselves permission to load up," says Ed Abramson, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and author of *Emotional Eating*. Call it turkey bacon syndrome.



YOUR MOVE: Stick to reasonable portions, even when the food is "less bad" for you, such as sugar-free cookies or reduced-fat potato chips or crackers.

3 **YOU THINK I'M STRESSED. FOOD WILL MAKE IT BETTER.**

REALITY CHECK: It won't. Eating to battle stress only makes you eat again the next time you're upset. Food won't solve your problems, no matter how good it momentarily tastes.

YOUR MOVE: Come up with another method for coping, such as taking a quick walk, even if it's just around your desk. "I always encourage people to look at the thought patterns behind their stress," Abramson says. "Usually, you can figure out more adaptive strategies for coping rather than eating. It may take your mind off the problem, but it doesn't change anything."

4 **YOU THINK I'M GOING TO HAVE GREAT ABS.**

REALITY CHECK: Your focus is wrong. Great abs only come as a result of a whole-body approach to fitness.

YOUR MOVE: Don't daydream about the results. Instead, focus on making incremental, positive changes in your body and spirit. "The final stage should be your 'macro goal,'" says John Romaniello, owner of Roman Fitness Systems, in New York, and author of *Final Phase Fat Loss*. "It's more important to create smaller, more immediate goals, which I call 'micro goals.'" Think about getting to the gym three times this week, not how you might look in six months.

5 **YOU THINK SHE'S ALL THE MOTIVATION I NEED.**

REALITY CHECK: Get real. External motivation, like getting the cute girl who lives in your apartment building, is fine to help you get started. But a commitment to long-term fitness comes from within.



YOUR MOVE: Continuously challenge yourself. "For weight loss to be permanent, the motivation has to be your own," Abramson says. Otherwise, you'll continue making excuses and rationalizing your lack of effort.

6 **YOU THINK IT'S HARD TO BE DIFFERENT.**

REALITY CHECK: Finally, you're right! To lose weight, you definitely have to eat and live differently from the way you once did. Friends and family will be your biggest challenge. They might "accidentally" sabotage your success by suggesting seconds at the Sunday family dinner or trying to get you in on the 25 cent wing special at the bar down the street.

YOUR MOVE: "Don't be swayed, even by those you love," White says. "And if someone is really getting on you and making things harder, you may need to reevaluate their place in your life."