

Wellness Wednesday



April 29, 2020

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Stop Obsessing Over Quarantine Weight Gain And Cut Yourself Some Slack

Here's how to let go of fear around the coronavirus "Quarantine 15" and feel good in your body instead.

The "COVID-19 pounds of weight gain" memes popped up pretty much the second we started social distancing and staying home. And while it's always infuriating when people make jokes about weight gain, the "Quarantine 15" posts and advice articles are especially gross.

There's already enough stress right now: Unemployment is skyrocketing, hospitals are on overflow (or preparing for the possibility), many people are struggling to meet basic needs, and no one really knows when or how this will all end.

The fear of added pounds during this time is a reflection of the diet culture we live in. We're terrified of weight gain — even in the midst of an unprecedented global pandemic — because we're constantly flooded with messages that gaining weight or living in a larger body is very, very bad. We're collectively obsessed with diets, products and intense workout routines that feature before and after photos.

In a time of such anxiety and uncertainty, of course we cling to these weight-centric obsessions — they're familiar, which right now makes them feel almost comforting.



Still, this incessant, communal fear of weight gain is really too bad. It's especially harmful for anyone with a history of an eating disorder or similar mental health issues, but it's stressful for pretty much everybody. (And, again, there are too many actually legitimate things to be stressed about right now.)

Unfortunately, the weight gain jokes aren't going away anytime soon. In the meantime, here's what you can do to tune them out and reframe your own perspective on weight, food and exercise during the pandemic.

Recognize your weight gain fears come from messages you've internalized, and those messages aren't necessarily true.

"You're not wrong for worrying about [weight gain], because we live in diet culture," said Brenna O'Malley, a registered dietitian and creator of The Wellful.

Right now, diet culture is sending direct messages like "Quarantine 15" memes and tips for not gaining weight during quarantine. But there are also subtler messages everywhere — the absence of larger bodies in the media, or comments like, "Are you sure you want to eat that?" when you're going for a slice of office birthday cake.

The first step in ignoring messages like this is recognizing that weight gain, or living in a larger body, isn't inherently unhealthy.



"Health encompasses a whole variety of factors, it's multifactorial," said Ayana Habetmar, a social worker, registered dietitian and founder of Truly Real Nutrition.

Social determinants (race, socioeconomic status, gender, stress, perceived stigma), genetics and other lifestyle factors also play a huge role in your overall health. Plus, the link between weight and health is complicated. A 2019 study looked at data from 100,000 Danish adults collected in various cohorts over 40 years, and found that people in the "overweight" category actually had the lowest mortality risk of all BMI categories.

Knowing this won't instantly change the way you feel about weight gain, nor will it change the way our culture talks about it. But mentally calling out fatphobic thoughts and comments as they come up is a good place to start, O'Malley said.

Remember the idea that everyone is going to gain weight during this pandemic is just not true.

Underneath the memes is the unspoken assumption that the pandemic will automatically lead to weight gain for everyone, which just isn't logical.

"That's a really sweeping generalization," O'Malley said. "I don't think we can make that assumption."

In fact, if you're worried that a disruption to your routine will automatically lead to weight gain, it might be that your routine is too strict to begin with.

“Do you assume that not having control over your eating schedule or workout schedule means that you will gain weight? Get curious about where that thought is coming from,” O’Malley said. “So many of us think we constantly need to be calculating our food intake and logging a certain number of workouts.”

We’re hyper aware of what we’re doing around movement and eating, so we worry that we’ll gain weight as soon as we loosen the reins.

Such a regimented approach to eating and exercising isn’t generally sustainable long-term. In a 2011 review of the existing evidence about weight and weight loss, the authors found that almost no one was able to sustain significant weight loss for more than five years, and that dieting and other weight control behaviors usually just led to weight cycling. Essentially, you lose weight when you start a new routine, inevitably gain it back, then find another routine that starts the cycle all over again.

If you’ve “fallen off the bandwagon” of your eating or exercise plan during this pandemic, understand that it likely would have happened anyway if it was too strict, quarantine or not.

Know that emotional eating is kind of to be expected.

As pandemic anxiety grows, Americans are drinking more and more; alcohol sales are up 55% compared to this time last year. That wine may feel like a vital part of your social distancing practice, but your sleep schedule will likely disagree.

“A lot of people are using alcohol to self-medicate their anxiety, particularly to help them fall asleep — and that is really bad,” Rosen said. “While it might work for falling asleep faster, it is also associated with increased wake after sleep onset. So, it could make you fall asleep faster but fragment your sleep.”

O’Malley also pointed out that of course your eating habits are a little different these days.

“A lot of things have changed recently. People’s access to food has changed, their schedules have changed, their routines have changed, and we’ve had really stressful events happening,” she said.

The food in your house is likely different than normal, too. “The idea that we’re eating differently — in a different pattern, different foods than before — makes a lot of sense when we frame it as: When things change, things change,” she said.

In the first week or so of quarantine, you may have gravitated toward comforting foods like pizza and ice cream. “We tend to equate comfort foods with foods that are rich, savory, creamy, sweet and generally more energy-dense,” Habetmaria said.

And that’s often true — these foods taste good, and can trigger a dopamine response in our brain that also makes us feel good. “But it’s also the sentimental value of a food that makes it comforting: the nostalgia, the sense of security, the happiness, or the love that the memory of it provides,” Habetmaria added.

Eating these foods, and calling up these positive emotions, can actually be a helpful way to cope with anxiety and everything else going on.

Of course, food shouldn’t be your only coping mechanism. Sleep, movement, social connection (even if it’s virtual), and therapy are all things you can lean into for comfort and a sense of normalcy right now.

Try intuitive eating, which can help you feel less out of control around food.

When someone first lets go of food rules and starts eating more intuitively, there's often an initial period where they go overboard on foods that had previously been off-limits, Habtemariam explained.

But soon, these foods lose their intense appeal and the person settles into a pretty normal eating routine. The same thing will likely happen with your eating patterns during quarantine.

"If people are paying attention to how they feel and just allowing themselves to eat what they want, I do think the emotional eating will eventually taper off," Habtemariam said.

O'Malley also pointed out that bingeing is often a response to restriction. If you allow yourself to guiltlessly eat what you want, when you want, you'll likely feel more in control around food and be able to stop eating when you're full. On the other hand, obsessing about weight gain and setting rules around what you eat can perpetuate that out-of-control feeling.

Focus on regular movement, not intense exercise.

You might also be freaking out that not having access to the gym will lead to weight gain or a total loss of any progress you've made with fitness. Again, that isn't really true.

"There's a lot of research that shows doing bodyweight exercise or some high-intensity interval training can be enough for getting health benefits and maintaining aerobic capacity," said Pete McCall, an exercise physiologist and host of the "All About Fitness" podcast. "I wouldn't tell anyone to train for the New York Marathon by doing eight minutes of in-home bodyweight exercise. But can you maintain your fitness level that way? Yes."



That's not to say you need to be doing structured exercise right now. Many of us are too overwhelmed to even consider it. If that's the case, look at this as a recovery period.

"In my opinion, a lot of people who go to the gym six to seven times a week are chronically over-trained," McCall said. "If nothing else, this is a chance for that nagging knee injury to get better, for that shoulder thing to finally heal."

Instead of focusing on structured workouts, aim to get in some regular movement, which can totally include walking or yard work.

"Any kind of exercise really does help reduce the overall stress that we're feeling," McCall said.

Stress can raise our levels of cortisol, a hormone that affects blood pressure, blood sugar, and metabolism; movement helps keep these things in balance. And sure, after two weeks of being relatively inactive you'll start to lose some fitness, McCall explained. But, so what? Unless you're training to be on a podium somewhere, it really isn't a big deal.

"For people who are relatively fit, it should only take around two to six weeks to get that fitness back when this is over," McCall said.

And if you're still freaking out about weight gain, know this: A 2016 review of the evidence found that exercise doesn't have as much impact on weight as most people think, and that recreational activity (like sports or walks) was actually better for mood boosting and weight maintenance than intense exercise.

Bottom line: Know that worrying about weight gain isn't doing you any favors.

To be blunt, "the biggest threat to our health right now doesn't have to do with weight or food," O'Malley said.

The goal right now is to stay home, and to take care of your mental health by dealing with anxiety the best you can. You're not wrong to worry about weight gain, because that's the culture we live in — but putting it in perspective and giving yourself some grace can really help quell the fear.



TROPICAL MANGO BLUEBERRY LASSI



215 Calories | *PREP TIME: 5 mins* | *COOK TIME: 0 mins* | *TOTAL TIME: 5 mins*
YIELD: 1 Servings | *COURSE: Breakfast, Drinks* | *CUISINE: Indian*

INGREDIENTS

- 1/2 cup fresh or frozen blueberries
- 1/2 cup frozen mango chunks
- 1/4 teaspoon lime zest
- 1/2 cup organic plain fat free Greek yogurt
- 6 almonds, or 1 tablespoon almond butter
- 3/4 cup almond milk, or milk of choice
- 1 handful ice
- 1/8 teaspoon ground cinnamon, optional

Nutrition Information

Serving: 1 smoothie, Calories: 215kcal, Carbohydrates: 34.5g, Protein: 8g, Fat: 6g, Saturated Fat: 0.5g, Cholesterol: 2.5mg, Sodium: 221mg, Fiber: 5g, Sugar: 24.5g
Source: Skinnytaste.com

This recipe was slightly modified from the cookbook, *The Smoothie Project*. A cookbook filled with gorgeous, rainbow colored pages of smoothies I've been making and loving! I love the idea of adding frozen blueberries to a mango lassi, for extra antioxidants! The only modification I made was omitting the 2 teaspoons of honey.

TIP:

If you don't have frozen mango, frozen peaches would also be delish! This makes a really tall glass, if you wish you can split this for two servings as part of a multi-course meal.



INSTRUCTIONS



Tropical Lassi is a healthy, Indian yogurt drink blended with frozen mango, tart blueberries and spices.

A lassi technically is not a smoothie, more like a healthy milkshake but with the addition of milk and yogurt, it can certainly pass for one. The probiotic power of yogurt forms the base of this recipe, and it's mixed with tropical mango and tart blueberries, which give the drink its bright blue color.

HOW TO MAKE

Combine all the ingredients in a blender and blend until smooth.

FEATURED EXERCISE

<https://kettlebellsworkouts.com/teaching-points-for-the-kettlebell-squat/>
Regular exercise can help you control your weight, reduce your risk of heart disease, and strengthen your bones and muscles. But if it's been awhile since you've exercised and you have health issues or concerns, it's a good idea to talk to your doctor before starting a new exercise routine.

FREE Killer Leg Workout You Can Do Anywhere

You don't need to do a bunch of crazy exercises to get a great leg workout. The best killer leg workout is one that contains basic exercises. Simple as that!

Kettlebell Squat - 12 Reps X 4 Sets

Here are a few teaching points for the basic squatting movement:

- 1.) Start the movement by pushing the hips backwards
- 2.) Keep the weight on your heels and the outside of the feet
- 3.) Imagine you are wearing ski boots
- 4.) Widen the feet if you have hip mobility issues
- 5.) Turn the feet out to approx 10 degrees
- 6.) Thighs must get to at least parallel with the floor
- 7.) Push the floor away from you on your way up
- 8.) Keep the back flat, chest up and look up



9.) Breathe in, hold and descend, breathe out on the way up
It is important to note that if you do not squat deep enough (thighs at least to parallel with the floor) then you are not engaging your backside correctly.

Shallow squatting will only work your quads (thighs muscles) and not the largest muscles in the body, your glutes (backside).



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