

# Is Your Marriage Making You Fat?

Most people put on extra pounds after they say "I do." Here's how to shed the weight. BY LINDA KNITTEL

**M**ARRIED WOMEN AND men are more likely to be overweight or obese than single people, and the older they get, the more weight they gain, according to a study published last year in the *American Journal of Human Biology*. If you've walked down the aisle and have the extra girth to prove it, you can drop those pounds. The trick is to work with your partner's attitude, not against it. To make the most of a spouse who supports your weight-loss efforts, follow the tips that begin on this page. If your partner won't help out or sabotages your efforts (intentionally or not), the tips that begin on page 44 will help you succeed.

## How to Lose Weight with Your Partner's Help

Experts agree that involving your spouse may help you slim down faster than going it alone. Here's how to get the most out of your team effort.

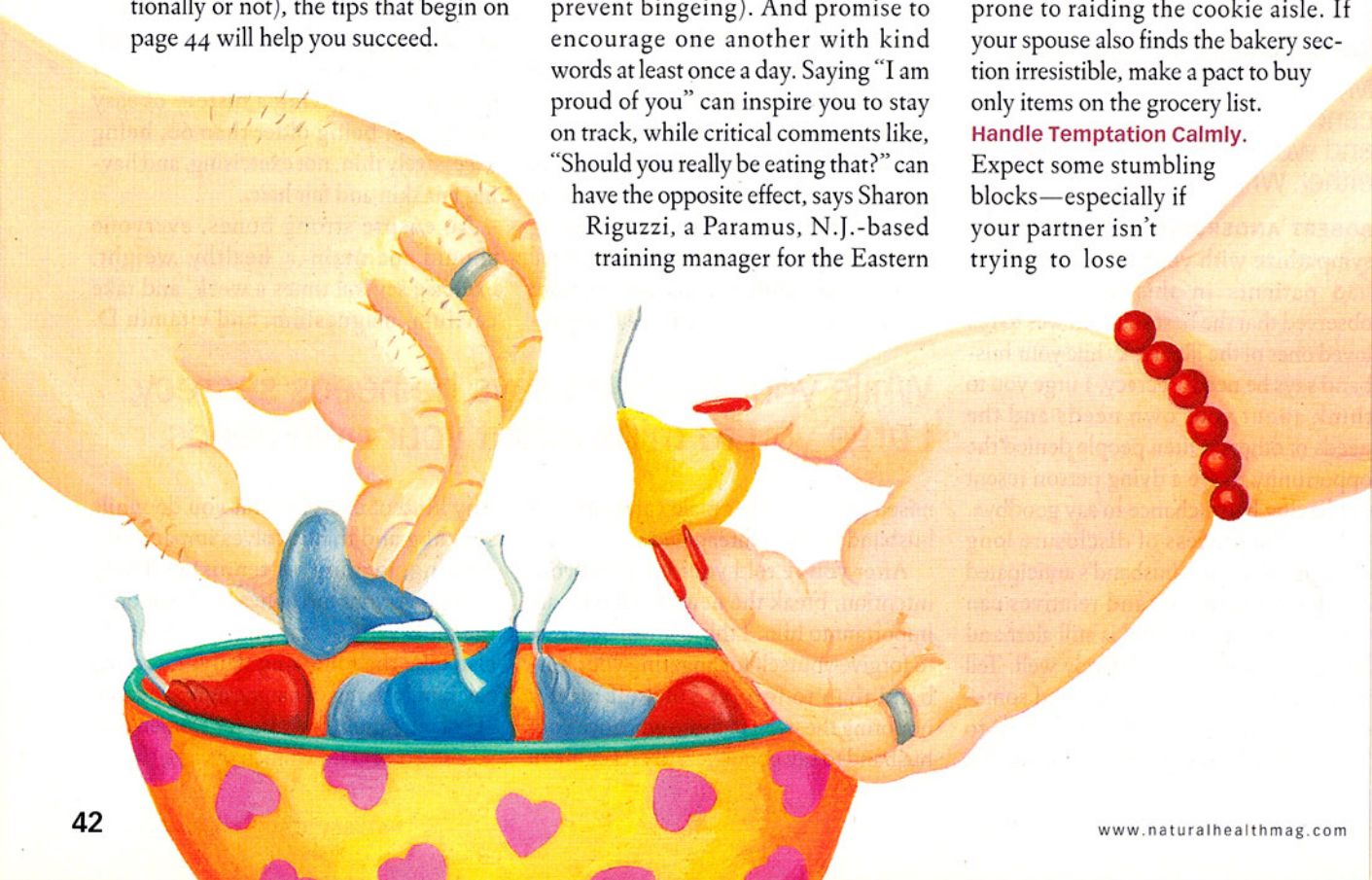
**Make Some Pledges.** First, set up new house rules that will help you (or you and your spouse) reach your weight-loss goals. You might enact a moratorium on chips and cookies in the house, or agree not to offer each other seconds at dinner. You could plan to eat breakfast with your partner every day (a breakfast that includes protein, complex carbohydrates, and healthy fats will help you feel full longer and prevent bingeing). And promise to encourage one another with kind words at least once a day. Saying "I am proud of you" can inspire you to stay on track, while critical comments like, "Should you really be eating that?" can have the opposite effect, says Sharon Riguzzi, a Paramus, N.J.-based training manager for the Eastern

Region of Weight Watchers Int. If your spouse expresses concern about the changes, discuss compromises like indulging in dessert once a week, suggests Edward Abramson, Ph.D., a Lafayette, Calif.-based clinical psychologist and author of *Marriage Made Me Fat!* (Kensington Publishing Corporation, 2000).

**Trade Food Duties.** Being married, especially if you have children, often means preparing lots of meals. Nibbling during food preparation can add extra pounds. Consider asking your spouse to help make lunch or dinner a few times a week, and offer to do another chore in return. Riguzzi suggests occasionally trading grocery shopping for laundry duty if you're prone to raiding the cookie aisle. If your spouse also finds the bakery section irresistible, make a pact to buy only items on the grocery list.

## Handle Temptation Calmly.

Expect some stumbling blocks—especially if your partner isn't trying to lose



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weight. "Someone who doesn't have a weight problem may not understand how tempting being around junk food can be," says Cindy Wolff, R.D., Ph.D., professor of nutrition and food sciences at California State University in Chico. For example, if your well-meaning spouse buys Girl Scout cookies, don't panic. Gently remind your partner about your agreement not to bring junk food into the house and give the goodies to a neighbor or have your partner hide them. Or, if your spouse suggests bringing home pizza and a video on Saturday night, propose a healthy dinner to accompany the movie. "Realize, however, that you will have some successes and some slips," says Abramson. The key is to let go of guilt and accept the fact that weight loss is a gradual process of change, he says.

**Exercise Together.** Exercise is one of the best ways to spur weight loss, but many people have trouble staying motivated. Working out with your spouse can help you stick with it. For example, researchers

studying a group of married people who began a year-long exercise program found that only 6 percent of those who worked out together dropped out compared to 43 percent of those who exercised solo, according to the *Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness*. Consider walking, which research shows to be one of the best ways to lose weight. Walking also allows you to share private time with your partner, says Abramson. Set goals like walking a mile after dinner every night. Or join a gym or yoga studio that offers two-for-one memberships.

### How to Drop Pounds Without Your Partner's Help

If your spouse won't support your efforts or even tries to interfere with them, you can still slim down. Here's how.

**Seek Out Support.** Find a friend, colleague, or other family member who is willing to lend encouragement. Exercise together or meet for a healthy lunch a few times a week. Or consider a formal weight-loss support group or program (your yellow pages can lead you to these).

In a group setting you'll hear how other people have dealt with problems like spousal resistance, says Cindy Wolff, R.D., Ph.D., professor of nutrition and food sciences at California State University in Chico. Internet weight-loss communities, like [www.cyberdiet.com](http://www.cyberdiet.com), can come to the rescue when a late-night craving strikes and everyone else you know is asleep. Keep in mind that some programs require a fee.

**Talk to Your Spouse.** If you encounter resistance, like snide comments about your weight or a refusal to eat the healthy foods you serve, ask how your spouse feels about you losing weight. Your partner might be insecure about your motivation for looking better and try to sabotage your efforts. "Explain that you want to look and feel better for the two of you, not for anyone else," suggests Sharon Riguzzi, a Paramus, N.J.-based training manager for the Eastern Region of Weight Watchers Int. If you can't soften your spouse's resistance, learn to protect yourself from criticism so you'll stick with your weight-loss program. In advance,

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prepare a few comebacks to use if your spouse exploits the weight issue to sway an argument, says Edward Abramson, Ph.D., a Lafayette, Calif.-based clinical psychologist and author of *Marriage Made Me Fat!* (Kensington Publishing Corporation, 2000). For example, if your spouse says, "If you didn't eat your expensive healthy food we'd have enough money to pay our bills," a line like "I am happy to talk about my food choices after we finish reviewing the finances" will keep your discussion from getting sidetracked. And if your spouse criticizes the meals you're making, describe their health benefits rather than their weight-loss benefits. Explain that foods like fish and leafy greens help prevent heart disease, says Riguzzi.

**Work Around Your Family's Favorites.** If your spouse (or children) insist on eating fattening food or refuse to skip dessert, try to compromise. "Most likely you can continue to make your family's favorites and simply readjust your own portions," says Wolff. Fill your plate with vegetables and whole grains, and treat richer foods

like macaroni and cheese as side dishes. Also explore ways to lighten old favorites like meat-filled lasagna (try using lower-fat cheeses and replacing some or all of

## A low-sugar fruit juice bar is a delicious alternative to a fattening dessert.



the meat with vegetables like spinach and mushrooms). And a ripe mango or a no-sugar-added fruit juice bar makes a delicious alternative to a fattening dessert.

**Squeeze in Exercise.** If your spouse complains about the time you spend at the gym, don't quit. Instead, walk at lunchtime or hit the gym in the morning before your family wakes up. Just increasing everyday activities like walking to the store or taking the stairs can also help you stay trim. Log your steps with a pedometer, available at sporting goods stores. "We often recommend that people strap on pedometers to encourage them to move around more during their normal daily activities," says Wolff. People who walked 9,000 steps a day were more likely to maintain a normal weight than those

who recorded 5,000 or fewer steps, according to a 2001 study in the *International Journal of Obesity and Related Metabolic Disorders*.

**Get to the Root of the Problem.** If these tips aren't enough to help you sidestep an unhelpful spouse, underlying relationship issues like a lack of trust may be to blame. Understanding and ultimately breaking unhealthy patterns in your relationship can increase your chances of losing weight, says Abramson. If you suspect a relationship issue is preventing your weight loss, consider asking your physician, friends, or spiritual advisor to recommend a marital counselor. Even if your spouse refuses to go with you, you may gain the insight you need to resolve the problem and eventually lose the weight. ●

*Linda Knittel is a freelance writer in Portland, Ore. By introducing her boyfriend to yoga and a healthy diet she helped him lose 40 pounds.*



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