

# Dealing with your DIET SABOTEURS

We all know one – the colleague who tells you ‘just one won’t hurt’ or the friend who calls you a ‘party pooper’ if you won’t join them for curry or cocktails. It’s not always what they say, though, that derails your healthy eating plan – sometimes there’s a pattern of (perhaps unconscious) behaviour that’s hard to resist. That’s why it’s important to understand that their reasons for trying to sabotage your diet are often more to do with them than you, and may be deep-rooted in their psyche. We asked psychologists Professor Jane Ogden and Dr Aria Danesh to give us strategies for staying in control of your own diet.

## The experts



**JANE OGDEN**  
Professor in health psychology at the University of Surrey



**DR ARIA DANESH**  
Behavioural change psychologist specialising in weight loss, and personal trainer

## SO WHO’S MAKING YOU FAT?

To help you stay strong in the face of temptation, you need to identify who’s throwing your healthy eating off track, so you can develop strategies.

## THE SPOUSE OR PARTNER



The person you live with can get up to all sorts of tricks to wreck your diet plans. They may order takeaways when you’re feeling too tired to cook, book a table at your favourite restaurant as a surprise or involve you in social situations you find hard to deal with in terms of food and drink. It doesn’t matter if it’s conscious or unconscious – the effect on your willpower is the same.

### JANE

For many people, food is the currency of love, and providing it is a way of showing their affection. If he or she buys you chocolate, encourages you to have a pudding, or cooks a delicious meal that happens to be very high in calories, you probably feel obliged to eat it.

There’s also a power dynamic working in many relationships – with one partner often feeling they’re punching above, or below, their weight in terms of how attractive they feel. Any change in your appearance challenges the status quo, and although your partner may say they’re supportive of your goals, deep down they may feel threatened and insecure and wonder if you’ll still need them when your life improves. After all, sometimes couples do split up when one of them loses weight (the divorce rate is high in couples where one has had bariatric surgery, for instance). This may be because the person who lost the weight had been unhappy previously and only stayed because they secretly felt they didn’t deserve to be with anyone ‘better’.

- **Be frank** Just come out and say it: ‘You’re making me feel as if you don’t want me to succeed. Are you feeling insecure?’
- **Reassure them** by saying that they have no reason to be insecure and that changing your appearance by losing weight doesn’t mean it will change your feelings about them.

### ARIA

The first step is trying to see beyond your partner’s damaging behaviour and recognise that they’re fearful of the change in you and what it might lead to. I agree it’s important to reassure them you love them and want to be with them. Tell them you’d love them to be a positive influence and a source of support and to be part of the journey you’re on.

- **Invite them** to share new activities with you, such as dance classes or a walking trail – any healthy activity that doesn’t revolve around food and drink.
- **Show them** it’s possible to socialise and still eat well – experiment with new recipes at home and choose restaurants where it’s easier for you to make healthy choices from the menu.

## THE COLLEAGUE



You spend a lot of time at work, so there’s lots of opportunity for others to break your resolve by offering biscuits with tea, a cake brought in for a birthday or invites for leaving drinks. But while many will take no for an answer, there’s often one who won’t let it rest.

### JANE

‘Feeders’, who get pleasure from nurturing others with food, are often very careful what they eat themselves and get vicarious satisfaction from seeing others eat the things they’re resisting.

- **Tell them** you need to shed some pounds for health reasons – this gives your resistance a legitimacy they’ll understand. By making a public declaration of your goals you also make it harder for them to undermine you by tempting you.
- **Suggest** you have a fruit bowl in the office to encourage healthy snacking. Some organisations have a policy that eschews cake, biscuits and vending machines.
- **Make an excuse** to avoid regular after-work drinks or go along and drink diet tonic – people won’t know what’s in your glass.
- **For an after-work meal**, research the menu online in advance, decide what you’re going to eat – and stick to it.

### ARIA

Work can be a tricky scenario, but you shouldn’t let yourself feel pressured into eating something you don’t want even if the person offering is your boss.

- **Respond** to the pressure to eat a cupcake, for example, by saying: ‘They look delicious, but I’m full at the moment.’ Or take one and say you’ll save it for later (who’ll know if you eat it or not?).
- **Pay a compliment** such as: ‘I’m tempted, but I’m trying to get into my summer clothes/wedding outfit,’ or ‘I’m full now but you must give me the recipe.’ Feeders often just want to feel acknowledged and validated.
- **Explain** you’re trying to lose weight and their support will really help. →

THE CHILDREN



Whether it’s Easter, Christmas, the summer holidays – or just any normal day of the week, spending time around children can disrupt your attempts to stay on track. How do you avoid being tempted by the snacks they demand, or refrain from hoovering up their leftovers?

JANE

Children don’t consciously set out to wreck your healthy eating plan – it’s more that having a culture of allowing them cakes, biscuits, crisps and chocolate in the house may make these difficult for you to resist. The way round this is for the whole family to become healthier by simply refraining from buying these foods. This way, children will learn that pestering you for them is pointless. Explain they can have them occasionally when they’re outside the home (at a café or a friend’s house, for instance), but they’re not for everyday eating. Explain in simple terms the negative effects of too much junk food.

- **Change the household** culture by working on children’s attitudes to

healthier foods, so it becomes normal to have healthier options in the house. Don’t expect them to hear ‘healthy’ as a positive word, however. Instead, use phrases such as ‘nice vegetables’ or use adjectives such as ‘crunchy’, ‘tasty’, ‘filling’ or ‘yummy’ when talking about healthy foods.

- **Whip leftovers** off the table as soon as possible and into a composting box, so you don’t end up eating them yourself – and don’t feel guilty about waste.

ARIA

Neuroscience studies show when we’re tired and run down the brain seeks out high-fat/sugary foods. This is an evolutionary hangover – our brains are hard-wired to make sure we find enough calories to survive. Looking

after children can deplete our mental resources and willpower, so by the evening it can be difficult to resist leftovers and other high-calorie foods. It reaches the point where the brain says, ‘Revert to the easiest option.’ A lot of damage can be done in the evening, when willpower is low.

We know it’s best to lead by example, so if you consistently eat healthily, children will start to model their behaviour on yours. By showing restraint – a takeaway pizza once in a while, rather than every Friday, say – you’ll teach them to moderate and find a balance in what they’re eating. That Friday night pizza will no longer be the family norm.

- **Don’t keep** any foods you don’t want to eat in the house.
- **Put snack foods** out of sight – a study showed people ate 80% more chocolate when it was kept in a clear plastic container rather than an opaque one.
- **Keep healthy foods** at eye level in the fridge and a fruit bowl on the worktop.
- **Sit down to eat** your main meal when your children have theirs. Or, if eating later, make yourself a healthy snack so you won’t sneak food off their plates.

THE PARENTS



Even as an adult your mum and dad can mess up your healthy eating regime, whether they’re doing it deliberately or not. This might be a case of serving you up a huge portion of Sunday lunch, or bringing home fish and chips when you visit.

JANE

When we have children, the pressure is to fatten them up in order for them to thrive. To see them lose weight is worrying, and this can persist even when your child is an adult. And, if your parent happens to be overweight,

‘We kept a snacking “tin of sin” at work’



Merran Waters, 44, an office worker from Eastbourne, has lost 2 stone by following a healthy eating and exercise regime.

Over two years I’ve lost a lot of weight by cutting out all the rubbish I was eating and concentrating on cooking my meals from scratch from healthy ingredients. It doesn’t involve anything faddy – just common sense. I’ve also taken up running, cycling and swimming and hope to do a triathlon in May.

But when I first started eating healthily it was really hard because at work I was tempted off track by my colleagues’ snacking habits. There used to be this tin on a table that was full of chocolate and biscuits – we called it the tin of sin and it was a constant temptation. I’ve now managed to persuade my colleagues to put it away in a drawer, so it’s out of sight and out of mind. It really works and we’re all snacking much less.

I’ve also persuaded some of them to come to fitness classes with me, and I’ve set up a challenge for the whole company whereby people sign up in teams to run or walk seven miles a week for seven weeks. Over 100 people have joined in and they’re all enjoying it. The office is even paying for a medal at the end.

your losing weight can challenge their identity as an overweight person – they may feel threatened by the changes you’re making and feel guilty about their own diet and the way they raised you.

- **Tell them** you’re trying to lose weight on the recommendation of your doctor and ask for their support.
- **Suggest you lose weight together** if they’re overweight, and share healthy eating recipes.
- **Offer to meet up** to do something active such as a long walk rather than just having a huge meal.

ARIA

Meeting up with family can often revolve around meals – birthday dinners, Sunday lunches, picnics and bank holiday barbecues. The heavier your family and other people around you are, the heavier you’re likely to be because being overweight becomes normalised and we mimic their eating habits. But

just because big portions are the norm for your family, it doesn’t mean you have to conform to it.

Parental nurturing is for the most part well-intentioned as a parent still wants even adult children to be well-fed and looked after. So recognise they may feel rejected if you refuse the food they’ve cooked for you – if you ask for a smaller portion, for instance, or don’t want a second helping.

- **Help to serve up** so you can put less food on your plate without having to debate it.
- **Compliment the cook** on how tasty the meal is and ask to take some home with you in a container, pre-empting the offer of seconds.
- **Fill over half your plate with veg** if you’re having Sunday lunch. Fill another quarter with meat, leaving only a small space for roast potatoes.
- **Offer to cook** for a family meal – that way, you’re in control of what you eat.

THE FRIEND



She says she’s supportive of your efforts to lose weight, but still expects you to eat a muffin with your coffee or order a takeaway. What’s really going on, and how can you get her on side?

JANE

As with a partner, losing weight and looking happier will change the attractiveness dynamics of a friendship group. As you start to feel more confident your friend may feel threatened and feel they’re slipping down the pecking order.

- **Be upfront** about what you’re trying to achieve – make a public declaration about the goals and targets you’ve set yourself and ask for support.
- **Respond to the pressure** to eat junk food by saying something like, ‘I’ve just eaten,’ or, ‘I had a big lunch.’
- **Suggest alternatives** to food or drink, such as an exercise class or jog.

ARIA

If you start looking better and feeling more confident, this may bring jealousy to the surface and your friends may try to disrupt your regime – whether unconsciously or consciously. It could be that they’d also like to lose weight but don’t know how to.

If you have a slim/fit friend who doesn’t seem to like you losing weight, remember outward appearances don’t always reflect what they feel internally – they may be struggling to maintain their weight. Friends may not even be aware they’re disrupting your healthy eating plan. In other words, their actions may not be about you at all, but a reflection of their own insecurities.

- **Team up** Ask your friend to join you for a boot camp or an exercise class – you might inspire them.
- **Walk away** if a friend or group of friends is continually unhelpful even after you’ve made your goals clear to them. You need to be around more supportive people.

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