

WEIGHT LOSS



Step Up to a Breakthrough

We've got the reader-proven secret to lasting weight loss. And it's got something (actually, *everything*) to do with the word *eureka*.

BY KAREN ASP

WEIGHT LOSS

Over the past 13 years, *Women's Health* has documented hundreds of women's weight-loss journeys in our "You Lose, You Win" column. And while each story is complex and personal, one common thread weaves through all of them: a eureka moment.

The scientific world has long been familiar with these "aha" insights, but researchers are newly seeing them as pivotal catalysts for losing weight. "In terms of health, it has to do with realizing a behavior change fits with your life goals," says Elliot Berkman, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology at the University of Oregon in Eugene. That, he says, jolts people into action.

So are the odds of having one of these inspo bursts akin to those for winning the Powerball? Happily, nope. By understanding what happens in your brain during a moment when everything clicks, and adopting a few key habits, you can actually set the stage to spur one on.

How does it work? First, a peek inside your mind. While it may seem as if they pop up from nowhere, your brain has been letting these realizations simmer in your unconscious until "it has decided that it has enough information to bring one to your awareness," says Michael Shadlen, M.D., Ph.D., a professor of neuroscience at the Mortimer B. Zuckerman Mind Brain Behavior Institute at Columbia University.

About a second before you have the insight, your brain essentially "blinks" to reduce visual distractions, and "you start focusing inwardly," explains John Kounios, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Drexel University in Philadelphia and coauthor of *The Eureka Factor*.

Then, when the epiphany hits, as evidenced in Kounios's studies of people solving puzzles, a flurry of activity in the temporal lobes helps you see a connection between previously unrelated (consciously, anyway) ideas, which then bubbles up into your awareness. For instance, you might see a baby stroller, which makes you think of the family you want to have, which connects to thoughts about how much easier getting pregnant would be if you lost extra pounds, which makes you want to start getting healthier ASAP so you can achieve your larger goal.

The Eureka Formula

There are two types of breakthrough moments you might experience regarding your weight, Kounios says. The first involves recognizing that your health issues are more serious than you thought (you're rushing to catch a train and you're stunned by how out of breath you are). The second is when a solution to a problem you've been struggling with is revealed. For example, you might finally "get" why you're raiding the kitchen every night. Many of these scenarios involve avoiding uncomfortable emotions, says R. Trent Codd III, a psychological analyst at the Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy Center in Asheville, North Carolina. With kitchen raiding, you might be trying to quell the magnitude of your depression, but when your aha moment happens, you realize you have to let yourself feel some pain in order to heal and achieve better health in the long run.

Ready to BYOB? (That's Bring Your Own Breakthrough, natch.) With the help of our experts, we've devised this behavior math.



YOUR "WHY"

It's one thing for your M.D. to tell you to consider shedding pounds. But unless you have an internal desire to do so, you're not going to see success on the scale. So ask yourself why weight loss really matters to you. Is it about getting healthy so you can play with your kids? Reconnecting to your inner athlete? The more reasons you have and the more specific they are, the more successful you'll be at tapping your central motivation, experts say. Once you've identified your reasons (for instance, "I want to feel in control of my body"), write them on sticky notes and place around the house. Seeing them will reaffirm your goals.

"MY WEIGHT-LOSS WAKE-UP CALL"

Four women share how a lightbulb moment sparked their transformation.

Daniell Nielsen Jenkins, 41
Gramercy, Louisiana



► HER AHA MOMENT

On the morning of August 16, 2012, Daniell received word that her husband, Brandon, a police officer, had been killed on the job. Mired in grief, she experienced a flash of clarity that told her she had to get healthy and strong for their five children.

► HOW SHE HARNESSED IT

Daniell had struggled with weight most of her life and had yo-yoed in the past. This time, though, at 215 pounds, she approached things differently: "as something I was doing for myself, not to myself," she says. Six weeks after Brandon was killed, Daniell joined a gym and began working out with a trainer. She also started tracking her food with the MyFitnessPal app. Eliminating added sugar and empty carbs made a difference on the scale and inspired the former nail salon owner to become a personal trainer and help others get to a healthier place too.



GOOD MOOD

Low spirits don't just put a damper on your day; they can also squelch your chances of having a eureka moment, Kounios says. When feeling down, especially if anxiety is involved, we tend to think in a more analytical way, which can blunt creativity. But a positive outlook expands your scope of thought so you're open to remote possibilities and long-shot ideas that wouldn't come to mind if you were tense. Boost your overall mood by scheduling events to look forward to, like a mini staycation or a concert with a friend. Or just dance around your house to Robyn's "Call Your Girlfriend." Never fails.



ENOUGH SLEEP

Adequate shut-eye—seven to nine hours a night—is crucial for shedding weight because it helps control hunger hormones. Turns out, proper Zs can also trigger aha moments. Sleep improves mood, which can spur creative thoughts. But it also encourages a process called memory consolidation. "The knowledge you take in during the day is organized and restructured, which brings out hidden details and relationships among pieces of information," Kounios explains. Those new insights springing to the surface of your brain could wake you up or be waiting for you in the a.m., so sleep with a notepad by your bed so you don't forget them.



DISTRACTIONS

You know when people say they come up with their brightest ideas in the shower? They're on to something. "The running water provides white noise so you can't hear much, and you can't see much, which creates a state of sensory restriction," Kounios says. "This quiet moment helps nudge realizations into your conscious mind." If a shower doesn't do it for you, any activity where you're removing stimulation—like people, stark lights, loud noises, or your phone—and seeking quiet may do it. Take a walk in nature or drive down a peaceful country road, radio off.



EUREKA!



Once you have your insight, get ready for a heavy shot of motivation. "Aha moments give you a certain thrill," says Kounios, "and a charge to act on the realization you've just had." A healthier you awaits.

Katherine Garcia, 28
Los Angeles



► HER AHA MOMENT

While vacationing in April 2016, Katherine saw a photo of herself at the beach at 222 pounds. "I suddenly recognized that my weight was a reflection of me not caring about myself," she says. "I'd been using food to fill a void."

► HOW SHE HARNESSSED IT

As soon as she returned home, Katherine hired a nutrition coach, who had her start to practice mindful eating (taking time to chew her food and listen to her body's fullness cues), consume more veggies, and set boundaries with friends who often wanted to eat out or sent her tempting Instagram "food porn" photos (Katherine asked them to support her on her path to better health). She also began doing Zumba three or four times a week. Now, she has kept up her exercise habit and has mostly kicked her sugar addiction.

Tyraia Colbert, 33
Annapolis, Maryland



► HER AHA MOMENT

In 2014, something clicked for stiletto enthusiast Tyraia. "I could barely make it from the parking garage to my office because my weight [300 pounds] made wearing heels so uncomfortable," she says. "I knew I had to do something."

► HOW SHE HARNESSSED IT

Tyraia signed up for her job's wellness program—she's an office assistant at a medical center—and worked with a nutritionist to overcome her stress eating. She also began attending cardio-strength classes, Zumba, Pilates, and yoga four or five times a week. On lunch breaks, she walked to rack up 5,000 steps. Two years later, Tyraia's success has hinged on focusing on the positive. "People think that if they ate one bad meal, it's over, but you can get back up and keep trying," she says.

Catherine Anderson, 50
Maynard, Massachusetts



► HER AHA MOMENT

Right before Mother's Day in 2009, Catherine's then-husband filed for divorce. At 240 pounds, "I'd been miserable in my body for years," she says. "The shock of the split inspired me to take back some control of my life."

► HOW SHE HARNESSSED IT

After the divorce was finalized, Catherine joined Weight Watchers with a friend. After two years of doing cardio on a treadmill, she began exercising with a trainer at a gym, who introduced her to strength workouts and high-intensity interval training. "I embraced the challenge," she says. Encouraged by visible results, she cut out most processed foods, flour, and sugar and developed a love for healthier living: "The more time you put into the things you want to change, the more you'll change." ■