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Are Your Friends Making You

Your BFF could also be your BDD (biggest diet downfall). Here's how to break the pal-pig-out cycle.

BY HALLIE LEVINE SKLAR

Fat?

I was digging into spaghetti Bolognese with my book group the other night when it hit me: My friendships have always revolved around food. As teens, my pals and I scooped chocolate frosting right from the can and ate raw cookie dough by the spoonful at sleepovers. In college, I bonded with my roomies over pizza and beer. As adults, my sporty girlfriends and I lived for our Saturday post-run brunches and our pre-race pasta dinners. Yikes—were we food-obsessed?

“Eating is a social experience,” says Evelyn Attia, M.D., director of the Columbia Center for Eating Disorders at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City. “For some of us, it’s an activity we do with our friends.” Unfortunately, group munching can cause the pounds to add up. When you dine with another person, you consume 35 percent more than you would alone, research shows.

Got a pal (or two) who pushes your all-you-can-eat button? Here’s how to ID a chowhound and give your friendship—and your diet—a food fix.

Food Friend: The Comfort Queen

You just lost your job. You broke up with your boyfriend. No matter what the crisis, your best pal can see you through—usually over a pint of mocha fudge ice cream or a package of chocolate chip cookies. “Guys have drinking buddies when they’re depressed; women have eating buddies,” says Daniel Stettner, Ph.D., director of psychology at UniSource Health Center in Troy, Michigan. “Unfortunately, what should be a supportive relationship turns into a situation where both women enable each other to eat—and eat and eat.”

Step away from the table. Instead of self-medicating with food, do some cardio. “Exercise is a potent weapon against depression,” says Edward Abramson, Ph.D., a professor emeritus of psychology at California State University at Chico and the author of *Body Intelligence*. Thirty-minute aerobic workouts three to five times weekly for three months reduce mild to moderate symptoms by nearly half, finds a study from the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. Sign up for a Spinning class or start training for a 5K, and invite your friend to join you. In addition, stop the graze-and-gripe fests. If you need to spill, do it over the phone or when the two of you are on a power walk.

Food Friend: The Party Girl

Your phone rings at 5 p.m. after a crazy day at the office. It’s one of your buds, suggesting you both blow off steam by meeting at your favorite watering hole. Three margaritas, a heaping plate of nachos and an order of chicken wings later, you head home feeling ill.

“Overdrinking and overeating are common ways to cope when you’re under stress,” says Stacey Rosenfeld, Ph.D., a psychologist in New York City. Alcohol also loosens inhibitions, which means that you and your friend are much more likely to start diving into the chip bowl.

Step away from the table. Limit time with your partying pal to Friday nights only. If you go to a bar, pick one with few or no appetizers so you’re not tempted to overeat,

Abramson suggests. When you arrive, order a glass of wine and a glass of water and hold the alcohol in your nondominant hand, says Jackie Keller, R.D., a nutritionist in Los Angeles.

“Most people drink less with this technique.”

You consume 35 percent more calories eating with a friend than you would dining solo, research shows. You figure that if your pal can chow down, so can you. Good-bye guilt, hello heaping helping!

Food Friend: The Pig-Out Partner

After she moved into her own apartment last spring, Alina Tuttle-Melgar, 29, accepted a dinner invitation from her new next-door neighbor. The two hit it off, and soon they were spending three or four nights a week together eating hearty dishes like meat loaf and chicken pot pie. On

Saturday mornings they went to a local diner, where they ordered huge stacks of pancakes with bacon. “I never ate like that when I was alone,” says Alina, an account executive in Boston.

Why would someone who normally nibbles on healthy fare like grilled salmon and vegetables suddenly start putting away food like a truck driver? “When you see a friend chowing down on something fattening, it may give you permission to let go,” says Martin Binks, Ph.D., director of psychiatry and behavioral health and research at the Duke Diet and Fitness Center at Duke University. “The guilt is gone, and it’s suddenly easy to justify the hot fudge sundae even when you haven’t planned to indulge.”

Step away from the table. Visit with your pal between meals. “Schedule activities, such as going for a walk, that will keep you so busy you won’t have time to think about food,” says Abramson. Or suggest that the two of you sign up for a gym membership, so that all your get-togethers revolve around doing something healthy.