

The Real Reason You Can't Lose the Baby Weight

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Chaurie Brusie

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When I have a baby, the postpartum story is always the same:

I hope that the weight will magically fall off (breastfeeding is the secret, right?), experience more ravenous hunger in the weeks after the baby is born than the entire pregnancy, feel utter despair when stepping on the scale at my six-week checkup, and then spend the rest of the year alternating between working out like a mad woman and complaining to my husband about how fat I feel.

But this time around, after having baby No. 4, I decided to do things a little differently. By now, I knew the drill: I wasn't one of those women who only gained weight in my belly during pregnancy and I definitely wasn't one of those women who lost all the baby weight apparently while still in the hospital.

Losing weight and getting my body back to a place that felt comfortable to me would take time. And if history was any indication, it would take at least a year, or more like a year and a half, a time period that seemed to increase with each child. I vowed that instead of hating on my postpartum body and worrying why I couldn't lose weight and killing myself with exercise, this

time I would not stress out about my body. I would appreciate it for what it had done, treat it well through good food and exercise, and most of all, give it plenty of time to get back to "normal."

But when, in an unprecedented occurrence, I had actually somehow managed to gain weight at my six-week checkup, I went right back to my old ways. I cried and raged over my body, fell into a depression and became obsessed with my weight, and then of course, felt tempted to reach for my good old friends, fudge brownie and strawberry ice cream, for comfort.

As I fought off the advances of those not well-meaning friends, it hit me: Could all of my negative thinking and obsession with losing weight actually be hindering my efforts? They say that stress causes weight gain, so could there be a connection between loving your body and losing weight?

I turned to Franci Cohen, personal trainer and a certified nutritionist, for answers.

"Stress can definitely put a damper on weight loss goals," Franci told me. (Aha! We're on to something here!) She went on to explain that there is a very scientific relationship between stress (even the kind caused by stressing out over your postpartum weight gain) and weight loss. "Stress can interfere with the normal function of our neuroendocrine system and cause the body to over stimulate the production of certain hormones that can lead to weight gain," she said.

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She explained that when we are stressed—whether that be from physical stress, like running from wolves in our hunter and gatherer days, or mental stress like what today's moms experience—our body can't tell the difference. It simply goes into "fight or flight" mode and pumps out the same hormones to deal with that stress. And among those hormones is the real culprit in our battle against the bulge:

Cortisol.

Cortisol, unlike the other hormones, lingers around in the body for quite some time, explains Cohen. And the longer the body stays in a state with elevated cortisol levels, the greater the increase in your appetite, and the more likely you are to gain weight. "Almost all studies on weight loss or obesity have something to do with cortisol, and this is why," she says.

OK, so stressing out about our postpartum body and filling our mind with negative body-talk is definitely not the answer to losing the baby weight. So what is?

"The best thing to do is to first, banish those postpartum blues," advises Cohen. "Focus on the positive elements of motherhood that bring a smile on your face and send endorphins and happiness through your body."

She suggests starting a "mommy support" group, taking a class or simply getting together with friends to take your mind off the negativity and replace it with positive body love and support. And most importantly?

"DO NOT spend every waking moment staring in the mirror and examining every body flaw!" she exclaims. "Exercise, eat well and stay social with other moms that are going through the same life stage as you. With proper diet and exercise, and the support of friends and fellow mommies, you will stay positive, happy and relaxed, which will scientifically translate into a happier and thinner you."