

Health & Living

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Ask the therapist

My husband's penny-pinching is getting me down. Why can't we just live a little? Psychologist **Allison Keating** answers your questions *Page 33*



+ **Nina Byrnes** I am getting recurrent UTIs. How can I prevent this? *Page 31*

'I refuse to let age define me — so I'm taking control of my health'

Losing both her parents in quick succession devastated journalist **Audrey Kane** and she took solace in comfort eating and an unhealthy lifestyle. Now, with the help of a new fitness regime, she is coming out of the fog and determined to turn 50 in great shape



PART ONE
of our new
MIDLIFE
FITNESS
column

Audrey Kane (47) is preparing to future-proof her mind and body
PHOTO: FRANK MCGRATH

IF YOU'RE a woman of a certain age, there's a list of things you've probably done by now. Drunk too much wine, tried ridiculous dieting fads, watched GMTV so you could exercise with Mr Motivator and dated men who were no good for you. We've all done some of those things, right? It's just a little thing called life, you can't rewind it, so you learn as you go along.

But there's one thing that keeps reappearing on my list, one that I can never seem to leave behind — the dreaded *'I'm going to get in shape and stop eating crap'* regime.

Like many women in my age bracket — 40s to 50s — I'm struggling with my weight, and like most people, it's not my first rodeo — I've been here before. Seven years ago, to be exact, as I approached my 40th birthday I decided to do it — to get healthy 'once and for all' and get off the chocolate-laden merry-go-round.

And so I did just that.

I found a brilliant fitness coach, I managed to stay healthy, eat well, have the odd dessert, the occasional glass or two of wine — everything in moderation was working a treat. I was the version of me that I always wanted to be, not thin by any

means, but healthy, happy and doing some serious adulting to get my life in order — I was proper fit for the first time and actually enjoying it.

Another thing also happened during that particular fitness campaign — I met an amazing man. I put it down to the fact that I liked who I was inside and out and he seemed to like me too, so all was good in my world.

Fast forward four years, to age 44. I'm still feeling happy and content with life. Like everyone, there are ups and downs along the way, but I have my family, my friends, and a partner I adore. For once everything seems to be slotting nicely into place.

But life has a funny way of reminding you that the challenges are not over, not just yet.

However, nothing could have prepared me for my Dad's sudden passing on March 28, 2016.

For the first time in my life, I experienced grief at close quarters and it shook me to the core. His death changed me in ways I never thought possible. I no longer felt safe or content; I just felt empty.

So I began to comfort eat.

In a 2017 study, US researchers found that middle-aged

and older women who experienced more stress from major life events were more likely to develop obesity than women who did not report any stressful events, so the odds are already stacked against you, if you let them — and at this point, I let them.

We frequently toasted Dad with his favourite tipple, Jameson, made into an Irish coffee for myself, my siblings and Mam whenever we met up or I stayed over at the family home. We comforted ourselves with cake and chocolate, and anything that could distract us, even just for a little bit, from the pain in which we found ourselves and the giant void our larger-than-life Dad had left in the Kane clan.

There's no denying it, food brings comfort, and certainly during the early days of my grief I think I was trying to 'eat my feelings' instead of dealing with them. But grief will get you, no matter how hard you try to ignore it.

While the phrase 'be kind to yourself' is frequently used to those who are experiencing a bereavement, for me it became a doubled-edged sword; while I was being kind to myself, my health was put on the back burner.

Alcohol consumption went up, while physical activity went down and before I knew it, I was back to my old habits.

MEET THE TRAINER: DANIEL MEANY

I doubt my love for cake & red wine are on Daniel's fitness list

■ SO not knowing how to start this journey, I happened to see a post belonging to an old school-friend of mine. She looked in amazing shape. She had a before and after shot and the name of a place she had joined — this was the catalyst I needed. I got in touch immediately.

■ Her trainer and owner of 'Elate: Women's Online Body Transformation Coaching', Daniel Meany is a nutritional therapist and personal trainer, but the difference is, he only works with women in their 40s and 50s. He coaches them through weight-loss with a uniquely tailored programme targeted to resolve the constant yo-yoing that women struggle with due to the hormonal changes before, during and after menopause.

YOU HAD ME AT HELLO

■ It all starts with a phone call — the *Transformation Session*, which is free. Daniel explained why the techniques that helped me to lose weight 10 or 20 years

ago don't work now.

■ Daniel says: "Most women think that they are eating healthily at least 80pc of the time, but it's some of these very foods which are sabotaging most peoples fat loss. This can be very frustrating to learn as you may have been eating these foods in the past when you were slim."

"It's important to understand that during the transition to menopause and beyond, your oestrogen levels will decline. This can effect your metabolism, which can then lead to weight gain. This happens even if you have not changed your diet."

DANIEL EXPLAINS WHAT'S AHEAD

■ Three levels define a person going through the programme. From beginner to maintenance and the type of tactics we use as they adjust to the programme.

■ The type of nutrition and training programmes that clients follow evolve with the person.

■ **LEVEL ONE:** When a client is a beginner, we work on eliminating the need for sugar and hidden sugars.

■ **LEVEL TWO:** When clients have gained control, we then introduce various types of intermittent fasting and other techniques which ensure steady fat loss without plateaus.

■ **LEVEL THREE:** We then teach them how to maintain their results long-term where they continue with the healthy habits they have formed with us while also educating them on what they can eat without worrying about gaining weight.

■ Training also follows a similar pattern. With a total beginner this often means starting slow and working around existing injuries.

Now all I have to do is take my measurements, body weight and take my photos — (only the coaches can see them). Now this is a selfie I could do without.

Elate.ie owner, Daniel Meany



FROM PAGE ONE

Did I care? No, not really, because I had just lost my Dad and if cake and Irish coffees were helping, even just a little bit, then so be it. A few extra pounds I could carry for the moment; the loss I'll carry with me forever.

Exactly one year and three months after we lost our Dad — on July 1, 2017 — our Mam, my wonderful Mam, the woman I comforted during the loss of her husband of nearly 50 years, passed away from ovarian cancer.

You foolishly think because you have been here before, you know what to expect — but you're wrong.

What I've learned is that there is no singular roadmap through grief and previous experience doesn't necessarily prepare anyone for it when it hits again so soon. I was and I am heartbroken at the loss of my two wonderful parents.

My siblings and I light-heartedly joked that we comfort ate so much after Dad that maybe we should go the opposite direction with Mam.

But Mam had a thing for tea and cream eclairs, so that was never going to happen. It would be rude not to honour her with several meet-ups with family and friends, clink our tea-mugs, savour her favourite treat while sharing stories about this remarkable woman we got to call 'Our Mam'.

Mam was funny, clever, and had an incredible lust for life — she zip-lined in her 70s, for Christ's sake. She did horse-riding, painting and go-cart track racing... the list goes on and on. A force of a woman like no other I know or ever will.

We'd been on some amazing journeys over the years as well — including weight journeys too. We won some and we lost some — from the dreaded egg and orange diet to slimming clubs and everything in between, my Mam and I tried them.

We did so much together that I found her absence from my life mostly unbearable and unreal at times. You don't just lose your mother, you lose your best friend as well.

So, heartbroken once again, the Irish coffees are replaced with red wine at the weekend. Not that Mam ever really drank, except perhaps on the odd night out with the ladies' club.

I clicked a glass or two, or more, in her direction nonetheless over the last two years and with it the comfort eating didn't so much begin again — as it had never really stopped.

Now, two years after my Mam's death, I'm a reluctant adult orphan at 47. I miss having my two constant cheerleaders telling me how amazing I am; no matter the circumstances, they were always on my side.

Now I feel I'm hurtling towards 50 neither fit nor in control of my eating habits anymore — and I have no clue where to start.

While the grief ebbs and flows, I feel a need now to get stronger, both physically and mentally, partially because I'm undergoing spinal infusion for a bulging disc in a month's time and feel quite nervous about the operation and having to recoup for six weeks after.

I'm also back to a size 16 (and even that's starting to squeeze) and I've long since stopped enjoying shopping. My lovely clothes on the opposite side of the wardrobe, my size 14 side, are openly mocking me every time I open the doors.

I've grieved, I've eaten, I've drunk wine. I grieved and still do, but the food no longer makes me feel better; if anything it's making me feel worse.

It's time for a change of direction. I also worry about ovarian cancer and think my chances of beating any disease would be a lot better going forward if I were healthier. I also know at my age, the big M (that's menopause) is heading my way, so I need to get my ducks in a row — and not with a side of triple-cooked chips.

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My amazing partner tells me that weight is only one part of me and doesn't make me who I am as a person, there is so much more to me than my dress size. In my heart I know that's true, but I still want to change.

So trust me when I say this 'new' journey is not just about losing weight and feeling good again, it's about gaining some control back, and somewhere in the back of my mind I want to make my Mam and Dad proud.

Always so supportive in everything I did, I know that even in this journey, they would be rooting for me; Dad sipping a Jameson and Mam drinking her tea and happily eating an éclair, preferably from Anne's Bakery, cheering me on every step of the way.

Some of my Mam's last words to me were, 'you're braver than you think you are', and she always told us that mother knows best, so while I'm doing it for me, doing it for my health, I'm doing it for them too.

This is not just another fitness diary — this time, it's personal.

■ Follow my progress in *Health & Living* on September 23rd: **THE DREADED SUGAR DETOX & BEYOND**



I've grieved, I've eaten, I've drunk wine. I grieved and still do, but the food no longer makes me feel better; if anything, it's making me feel worse

With half the population seeking health information online, can the internet really replace a GP visit, asks **Christie Russell**

Men do it, women do it, young, old, even doctors admit to doing it sometimes. In fact, if there's anything surprising about the news that 50pc of us seek health advice online, it's that the figure is so low.

According to new research carried out on behalf of the RCSI, half of all Irish people surveyed say they use the internet to investigate potential health woes.

The knee-jerk reaction to such a statistic is to fear that these keyboard patients are putting their health at risk by not heading directly for their GP's busy waiting room.

But is the internet really such a bad place to venture when you're worried about your well-being?

Several months ago, I was told I would need a biopsy on my breast. I was breastfeeding at the time and advised to stop to have the procedure. Reluctant to do so if not absolutely necessary, I sought other opinions online, contacting one of the world's leading lactation experts, Dr Jack Newman, via the web, as well as experts in La Leche League.

Their response was that I did not have to stop breastfeeding. I went back to the surgeon who told me she too had done more research and agreed the biopsy could be done without cessation of breastfeeding.

If it hadn't been for the web, I wouldn't have known where to turn. It was a prime example of how access to specialist information online was able to help and empower me as a patient to make an informed choice about my care.

"Times have changed and the days where a patient happily accepted a diagnosis of a medical condition they had never heard of and a treatment plan which was communicated with little supporting information are gone and I don't think that's a bad thing. An informed patient is an empowered one," says Sheena Mitchell, owner and pharmacist of Milltown totalhealth Pharmacy and founder of wonderbaba.ie. She set up the children's health information resource website to allow Irish parents access to evidence-based information and guidance.

But she worries that parents online don't always know how to differentiate between reliable content and unregulated information. Indeed, the RCSI poll found that 69pc felt they couldn't trust information found online.

"My main concern is the quality of the information patients are accessing online," says Sheena. "I would guide patients to start with useful resources like the HSE and NHS websites and those of registered charities relating to a particular condition they are interested in, such as The Athsma Society of Ireland or ACT for Meningitis."

Simply Googling terms makes it difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff. And smaller, specialist organisations should come with a warning since it's not always clear if they may have a commercial interest in the information provided.

But it's also perhaps an appropriate time to flag up that misleading medical information isn't solely associated with the internet. Complex medical studies are often oversimplified in the news with declarations that 'a new study has revealed X causes Y'.

Here, the online world can offer much greater value and transparency. Many scientific publications are open to access online, and you can read for yourself how the findings are often far less black and white than the headlines would suggest.

The online world also gives instant access and platform to a world of expert analysis, voices on



The challenge is in differentiating between reliable content and unregulated information

Kill or cure: how useful is Dr Google?

Twitter like Dr Jennifer Gunter (@DrJenGunter), Professor Timothy Caulfield (@CaulfieldTim) and @justsaysinnice (to name three of my favourites) debunking science claims, correlation equated with causation and tenuous links between mouse research and human impact.

So of course there are benefits to having health information online, but what about symptom checkers? What about when you've got a bit of a dodgy rash, or a few vague ailments and you just want to know what's wrong without seeing a GP?

Well, here all the medical voices are in agreement — you cannot reliably self diagnose online. "Self diagnosis by non-medically trained patients can result in a failure to identify serious underlying conditions and can also result in the aggravation of pre-existing conditions through the use of inappropriate or unsafe treatment," says Sheena emphatically.

Part of the problem with most symptom checkers is they are rules based systems only covering a few hundred diseases. But the technology is evolving and improving. Isabel Healthcare is a machine learning based system, based on systems that have been used by doctors and hospitals for over 20 years, covering more diseases than traditional symptom checkers and with a 96pc success rate in generating the correct diagnosis within its list of potential diagnoses once the patient inputs their symptoms. Isabel currently generates up to 300,000 queries a month with Irish users accounting for 1.5pc of web-traffic.

"Doctors would rather patients use a site like Isabel which has been designed to do this job and has been properly validated rather than Google [or another search engine], which will just return thousands of answers," explains the site's founder and CEO Jason Maude.

Which isn't to say Isabel should take the place of meeting with a doctor. "We do not recommend using Isabel instead of seeing a doctor," says Jason. "But it's a way to make the consultation more productive. It allows the patient to become better informed and have confidence to discuss their diagnosis with their doctor and ask better questions."

He believes the health-tech market will only get bigger. "I think these tools will grow dramatically in usage. Patients are the most underused resource in health. Informed patients make much better patients and their outcomes are normally better. As clinicians slowly get overwhelmed with increasing demand and greater complexity, they will gradually start of encourage, then demand, patients use these tools to help them do a better job."

Since MyClinic.ie was founded in 2015, over 15,000 Irish patients have used the online healthcare service to order repeat prescriptions, avail of home blood testing and access video consultations with healthcare professionals. All this can be done from the comfort of their own home, seven days a week and, with video consultations costing €30 instead of the typical €60 faced in a GP surgery, at a significantly lower cost.

"Providing access to healthcare professionals using digital technology can help to remove some of the biggest barriers preventing people from getting appropriate health advice when they need it: access, time and cost," says Dr Daniel Clear, Managing Director of MyClinic.ie.

Last month, a study compiled by UK health and well-being provider Benenden Health found that over 100 million health-related Google searches were made in the last 12 months. Interestingly the top searches were health topics that often come with stigma or embarrassment attached — mental health and sexual health.

MyClinic.ie sees a higher proportion of consultations for so-called 'embarrassing' conditions like STIs or male sexual health problems. "This is clearly an area where technology and remote access to doctors can help remove such barriers to care," says Dr Clear.

From accessible, cost-efficient health care and expert, evidence-based information to ever-improving diagnostic tools that empower patients and help over-stretched GPs — there's no denying the internet can be a powerful force for good in patient care. Should it take the place of registered professionals? Absolutely not. But nor should we be afraid of the very real ways in which the virtual world can help to make us feel better.

'Self diagnosis by non-medically trained patients can result in a failure to identify serious underlying conditions and can also result in the aggravation of pre-existing conditions through the use of inappropriate or unsafe treatment'

ALL IRELAND Bone Marrow Transplant CONFERENCE 2019

Patient & Family Day

Date: Saturday 21st September 2019
Time: 10am - 1pm, followed by lunch | Registration: 9am-10am
Venue: John Durkan Lecture Theatre, Trinity Centre for Health Sciences, St James's Hospital, Dublin 8

Topics to be covered:

- Wellbeing
- Endocrine & Fertility issues
- Psychological support
- Late effects
- Nursing advice and support
- Patient Experience

Free registration for this event, please email: bmtpatientfamilyday@gmail.com