FEEDING ON
FEAR

Round-the-clock headlines, political rants, dire global events—it's enough to drive you to the nearest bag of cookies. If you're feeling the weight of the world in places other than your shoulders, we can help.

By Leslie Goldman

Cindy Hamilton, 40, of Highwood, Illinois, has a trainer, works out four times a week, and ran the Marine Corps Marathon last year—and yet she's gained seven pounds since November's contentious presidential election.

"I'll watch cable news while eating straight from a five-pound vat of licorice," she confesses. "It numbs my worry. Plus, I'm like, 'Everything's going to shit, so I might as well eat candy.' I never understood emotional eating before, but now, having a bagel and cream cheese makes me feel better in the moment."

Studies, and scales nationwide, show that Hamilton isn't alone. The sordid combination of heated political sparring and 24/7 news coverage of world calamity and crises—made worse by the attendant social

EXTRA! EXTRA! HOW *NOT* TO EAT YOUR FEELINGS

CURATE YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA. A 2016 study found that the more social media platforms you're juggling—more so than overall time spent online—the higher your risk for anxiety and depression, which can trigger stress eating. Rather than toggle between Insta, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and more, study author Brian Primack, M.D.,

Ph.D., recommends paring it down to your favorite one or two.

BE STRATEGIC. Devote a specific time to checking headlines so you're not bombarded all day. And at night, turn off your phone and read a book: What you view via social in the 30 minutes before bed is more likely to interfere with sleep than anything you saw

during the day—and too little shut-eye can mean more-active weight-gain hormones.

POST YOUR EMOTIONS. In a Facebook study of 30 million status updates, 38 percent expressed a negative emotion—but responses to those posts had nearly 2.5 times more supportive words and also more positive emotion, perhaps

because friends were wishing each other well.

GO FROM SNACKTIVIST TO ACTIVIST. "We feel empowered when we shift our focus to what we can control, rather than merely reacting to what we don't like," says psychotherapist Steven Stosny, Ph.D. So channel your anxiety by donating to or getting involved with a beloved cause.

media chatter and trolling—has driven more than half the U.S. population to eat, drink, or smoke as a result of the election, according to a survey by online health-care portal CareDash.com. Six percent of women have gained enough weight to cause them to see, or consider seeing, a doctor about it.

"Eating habits are greatly influenced by stress, anxiety, and other negative emotions, regardless of what triggers them—politics, work, or personal relationships," says Darnestown, Maryland, psychotherapist Steven Stosny, Ph.D., who coined the 2016 phrase "election stress disorder" and, more recently, "headline stress disorder." Constant exposure to terrorism scares and climate-change warnings, Stosny says, "creates a war-zone mentality in your brain, with each headline seeming like a little missile attack you're hoping doesn't hit you." Small wonder that Ashley Womble, a 36-year-old communications director in New York City, has been avoiding the gym. "They play cable news nonstop," she says. "I listen to music on my headphones, but whenever I look up from the treadmill, all I see is the news." Womble estimates she's now running five or so miles a week, as opposed to the 10 to 15 she was logging a year ago.

Some have called post-election weight gain the "Trump 15," but headline-induced anxiety is nonpartisan: A post-election survey by the American Psychological Association found that national stress levels saw the sharpest rise in

10 years, with 59 percent of Republicans and 76 percent of Democrats begging for a Brexit from reality.

CLICK WEIGHT

It's not uncommon to put on pounds in response to major life stressors, sometimes called "weight shocks" by researchers, whether the shocks are personal or global in nature. (Germans call weight gained from emotional overeating *kummerspeck*—literally, "grief bacon.") Simply thinking about a stressful event that you've experienced makes you burn 104 fewer calories—about 11 pounds' worth per year—per a study in *Biological Psychiatry*, and the study authors expect that a similar effect could happen when we ruminate about a nerve-wracking headline.

One culprit is hormones, says Fatima Cody Stanford, M.D., an obesity-medicine physician at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School in Boston. "When you're upset, levels of the stress hormone cortisol rise, prompting cravings for sweet or high-fat foods." Those urges are a throwback to prehistoric times, when we would stockpile calories in anticipation of
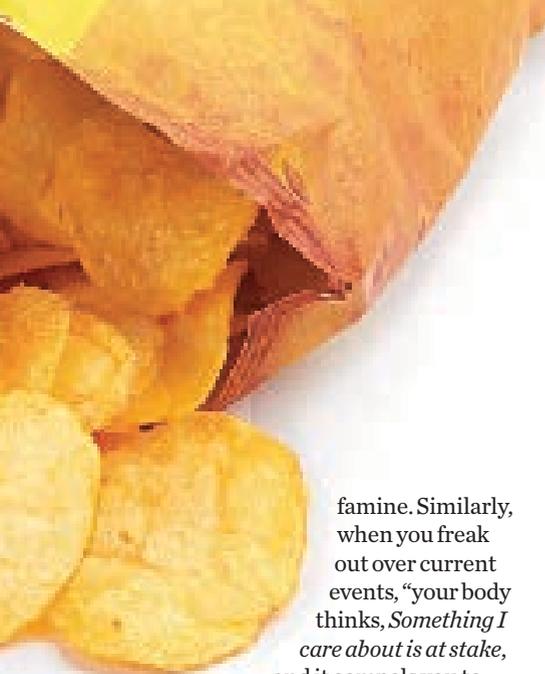
famine. Similarly, when you freak out over current events, "your body thinks, *Something I care about is at stake*, and it compels you to eat," says Washington, D.C., dietitian Rebecca Scritchfield, R.D. You're apt to choose comfort foods like mac 'n' cheese or doughnuts, because carbs act "like edible Xanax," she says, "stimulating the body to produce the feel-good chemical serotonin."

NO REST FOR THE WORRIED

A social media habit can also make you lose sleep, another pathway to extra pounds. When you lag behind in Zs, your body can release ghrelin, the "feed me!" hormone, says Scritchfield. Late-night scrolling compounds the problem: The headlines may get your blood boiling, and the blue-screen light from your device affects how much and how well you sleep. Christine Knapp, a 39-year-old massage therapist in Los Angeles, blames her recent yo-yoing weight on bad bedtime rituals. "I look at the news on Twitter and I'm mindlessly munching, and suddenly an hour has gone by. I crawl into bed and can't fall asleep, then I wake up with nightmares." She has gained back six of the 12 pounds she'd lost before the election.

Sleep deprivation also hinders your greatest weapon in the fight against headline-induced stress: exercise. Not only does working out spur endorphins, but it fuels emotional resiliency. "When you work out hard," says Scritchfield, "your mind often says, 'I want to stop.' But if you press through those pushups or that last five minutes of a run, it's like strength training for your brain. It builds mental toughness." So the next time you're faced with an emotional challenge— like reading an upsetting article—and you want to eat a cookie, you realize, "You know what? I'm stronger than this." And you are. ∎