Fit at 50

Gaining weight at midlife isn't inevitable.

October 1, 2021 By Tim Murphy

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, John Grauwiler felt the weight creep. The 50-year-old longtime New York City schoolteacher, who has been living with HIV since 2005, had always stayed slim and muscular, offsetting a love of pastries, pizza and ice cream with a regular gym routine. Standing 6 feet 2 inches tall, the broad-shouldered Grauwiler had for years managed to keep his weight stable, at around 190 pounds, and his tummy taut.

But a few years ago, he started putting in late hours at work—some of it to catch up on his duties as cofounder of the gun violence prevention activist group Gays Against Guns. The gym visits started to drop off, and the pounds started to add up.

"I was doing a lot of stress eating," says Grauwiler. "Growing up, my mom always had Entenmann's pastries in the house, so that was comfort food for me. I could go through two boxes of doughnuts in a week." On top of a big bowl of cereal and a large glass of orange juice for breakfast, he'd grab an apple fritter at Dunkin' Donuts before heading in to work. Throughout and after the workday, "I always had a doughnut with me," he recalls.

Was there another explanation for his weight gain? Recent research has linked certain HIV medications to weight gain. Since Grauwiler has been on the same effective HIV treatment for years, he knew he couldn't blame the meds.

Then came COVID-19. Suddenly, he was teaching from home via Zoom, with no gym to go to. For lunch, he'd run out for a burrito or a shawarma. "I was living in sweatpants," he says, "and one day, I couldn't even button my jeans. I was like, Holy crap!"

In late summer 2020, his gym reopened. Grauwiler stepped on the scale there one day. "I thought I'd be at 210 or 215 pounds, but I was at 228!" His belly had ballooned to the point that he couldn't see down there. "I started hating looking at myself in the mirror or in the glass reflection of a building," he says. "My chest looked like melted Brie and my stomach like cottage cheese!"

Then, one night, while watching The Amazing Race, he and his boyfriend, Demetrios, decided, as a fitness goal, to sign up for an adventure race several months away that would include hiking, biking and kayaking.

It was time, he decided, to get back in shape. “I started doing the rowing machine at the gym a lot,” he says, as well as getting back to weight training and incorporating some high intensity interval training circuits he picked up online and from Demetrios, a daily CrossFit devotee.

The real challenge, of course, was food. He’d already semi-committed to intermittent fasting, trying to confine his eating to a six-hour daily window, but he was spotty about it. “Demetrios and I would meet up for a late dinner, or I’d cheat on weekends,” he says.

So Grauwiler dialed up his food game and ate more lean protein (chicken, salmon) and greens (spinach, kale) and cut way back on carbs like bread, rice and potatoes. “If I had a burger, I’d only eat the bottom bun,” he says. “I started having my morning eggs without an English muffin. I’d get a burrito bowl with more greens than rice, instead of something wrapped in a tortilla. And I really practiced portion control.”

Then there was his longtime habit of stocking up on Entenmann’s at the grocery store. “Demetrios suggested that I keep one box in the cupboard, so I knew it was there if I needed it.” That bit of reverse psychology worked. “I haven’t bought Entenmann’s in months!” he says. As for alcohol, he’d already cut way down because bars and clubs were closed and he didn’t keep it in the house. “I started drinking way more water, which helped cut my appetite.”

Another boost was the fact that he was trying to slim down alongside a few close friends with whom he’s on a daily text thread. “Knowing that friends in my age group were also working on losing weight helped,” he says, “especially when we shared results and strategies and screamed in all caps via a text, ‘WERK!’”

In four months—by the start of summer 2021—he was back down to 205 pounds. By that point, he says, he’d turned teaching from home from a diet liability to an asset. “I stopped running out for pizza or General Tso’s and started having more omelets and grilled chicken and turkey sausage.”

Lo and behold, the belly that had vexed Grauwiler in the mirror melted away. Out at the beach this past summer, “I wore a midriff-baring look and felt confident and comfortable again. I definitely wouldn’t have worn that the summer before.”

But, he says, the weight loss wasn’t just about looking good—it was about finding a new balance, discipline and sense of agency in his life as he headed into his 50s. “I’d thought that getting heavier after 50 was unavoidable,” he says. “But that doesn’t have to be the case. I feel like I’m controlling my body again rather than having it control me. And I feel less pressure on my knees since I lost the weight.”

He’s a little worried about being able to keep eating well now that he’s back in a real classroom and out of his apartment more often. He’s thinking about throwing together quick salads or slow-cooker stews that he can tote to work to avoid falling into the old pizza/burger/shawarma routine.

Grauwiler also says sustaining his healthy eating means allowing himself a treat now and then, so as to not feel deprived. “I’ll still have a Milano cookie or two, just not six,” he says. “And I love my

Skinny Cow low-fat ice cream.”

Plus, he says, he’s redefined his idea of discipline. “Now,” he says, “it means not staying at work until 7 p.m. or 8 p.m. but having the discipline to leave at 4 p.m. or 5 p.m. and go to the gym. It means thinking not just about how much I can give to my students or my activism but how much I can give to myself.”

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