

2014

JANUARY

6 MONDAY

7 TUESDAY

Cut relationship graft to two days a week

8 WEDNESDAY

9 THURSDAY

10 FRIDAY

11 SATURDAY

Indulge in double helpings of sex and intimacy

12 SUNDAY

DO YOUR OWN
THING FOR FIVE
DAYS A WEEK...

2014

NOTES

The 5:2 Relationship

Applying the principles of the diet of the moment to your love life will make your relationship unbreakable and the sex unforgettable. And, as *MH* found, it only requires two days' effort per week

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...KEEPING
HER SATISFIED IS
A PART-TIME JOB

An ex-Royal Marine called Marty is barking at my girlfriend. We're midway through an eye-watering abs session on a chilly field in south London and Jen, my partner of five years, is being amazingly compliant. If it was me shouting at her, it would be a different story. But never mind – we're a team today and actually smiling our way through Marty's Revival Boot Camp. I send her a reassuring nod.

"It will all be worth it," I tell her. "Look at us – I can practically see the flab falling away!"

The reason Jen doesn't crush my testicles with a well-aimed knee is that I'm not referring to her physique. Incidentally, I'm not referring to mine, either. The tired, out-of-shape target of today's boot camp is, in fact, our relationship. After five years, it could use a shot in the arm and today is the first day of our new relationship diet.

POSITIVE PLANNING

As well as exercising together, we're going to work on how we communicate, how we spend our down time, even how we touch each other. But we'll only do it for two days per week. We're stealing the 5:2 weight-loss principle in which you restrict your calorie intake for two days a week, then forget about it for the rest of the week. Let's call it intimate fasting. The genius of 5:2 is that it's part-time. Everybody knows long-term happiness in a long-term relationship requires hard work. But seriously, who has time for that?

More British couples are cohabiting than ever, yet many spend less than three hours a day together. A survey by Cancer Research UK found that one in eight couples don't spend any of their 'together time' conversing. We're working late, stressed out by our finances and distracted by mobile phones. I have convinced myself (and Jen) that 5:2 is the answer. It's two days of serious romantic rehab, then five days of blissful autopilot.

"So, you're going to be nice to me for two days, then go back to normal the rest of the time?" Jen asked, when I first broached the subject. "Well, I wouldn't put it like that."

For two days a week, we'll practise what psychologists and relationship coaches advise us. I'm armed with a checklist of relationship-saving measures: searing honesty, extreme positivity, working out together, 'intimate nurturing' and watching pornography together. These will add sex, sensuality and a greater emotional bond, I promise her. It will blow away the complacency. We'll do it intensively, then forget about it until our next intimate fasting day.

"Porn?" asks Jen.

"Well, that's what the experts said."

THE FIRST FAST

The reason that Jen and I are crunching our way through Marty Yardley's boot camp is that after our class, we should float home on a dreamy hormonal cloud. But it will also force us to work together and pick each other up when we tire. As a sweetener, the *Journal of Sexual Medicine* reports that short bursts of exercise also boost sexual arousal in women, although I don't mention this to Jen.

"We're not doing anything where you're the boss," she had warned me. Our last attempt at running together ended with one kicked shin (mine). But as we exchange pep-talk during circuits and bond over the sheer hell of it all, I think the companionable crunching is working. Yardley agrees: the key to exercising as a couple is division of labour.

"Don't have a situation where one of you is the expert and the other the teacher," he says. "Have an equal dynamic."

This is great. I play good cop to Yardley's bad cop and offer support while he yells at Jen and tells her she's slacking. We head home exhausted, buzzing and

CONSULT THE DIARY:
MISBEHAVING IS OUT OF
BOUNDS TWICE A WEEK



THE INTERMITTENT ADVANTAGE

Whatever your goal is, attack it part-time and win

WEIGHT LOSS

The 5:2 principle can be adopted as a lifestyle choice in many different areas of your life, but it started out as a weight-loss plan. A study in *Nutrition & Metabolism* found that drastically reducing your calorie intake on one or two days a week for six weeks leads to an average loss of 4kg.

MENTAL HEALTH

A new study from Oxford University anthropologist Robin Dunbar recommends that men meet up with friends two days a week for drinks, sport or, to borrow a horrible Americanism, "guy time". Dunbar says that too often, men ignore the therapeutic benefits of socialising.

MUSCLE

Limiting heavyweight training to twice a week offers the same gains in strength and muscle growth as returning to the gym for a third session. The extra recovery time is the key.

BACK PAIN

Yoga needn't be a stretch. Practising it twice a week reduces pain for people who suffer with their lower back, a study by Boston University School of Medicine shows. And you don't have to buy any white hemp trousers.

very much on the same side. Of course, it's just the first day, and the first day of any new diet is easy. You're buoyed by good intentions and brimming with as-yet-untested willpower. It could be the bullish beginner mindset, but I think our diet will be a success. The optimism is probably a good thing because the next course of intimate fasting we'll be doing could turn out to be decidedly uncomfortable.

NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

Extreme honesty is exactly what it sounds like – we have to ban everything from minor mistruths to all-out bombshells. Dr James McNulty, a psychologist at Florida State University, found that honesty is better than forgiveness for building strength in a relationship and studies have found that fewer lies improve mental and even physical health.

Five years into our relationship, I'm still guilty of dropping fibs to buy time or dance around scarier conversations. Frankly it's exhausting, so I go for broke as soon as we get in.

"Jen, I am going out with the lads on Friday and Saturday. I will be back late both nights past 3am. Drunk."

"Why do I care? I'd like the space too," she says.

We agree to do something nice on Sunday instead. That was easy.

Soon, I am comfortably burning lies. "I was late the other night because I was watching the goals I'd already seen at the weekend." We're actually enjoying hitting each other with the truth stick. It's refreshing ... until it starts to hurt.

"I hate you using gel in your hair," says Jen. "It doesn't look manly."

While I'm dumping products into the bin, I also get, "When you were shouting at the TV earlier it wasn't sexy. I like it when you are in control."

I'm stung. Quiet and gel-free, it gets no better once we hit the lights. "We aren't doing anything until you file your nails down – not just bite them." I lie in bed furtively buffing – but not in a way I'd like.

As the lights go out, I'm thankful that our fasting day is over. I'm not due another dose of truth for a few days – something that doesn't go unnoticed by Jen. "Does this mean you can go back to lying to me for three days?"

During our first non-diet days, I assess our first taste of intimate fasting. The effort we're making with one another is manufactured and makes it obvious

HAPPY TO SEE THE BACK OF HER? TIME TO SCHEDULE IN A LITTLE POSITIVITY

JANUARY

Porn is next up on the menu

New policy: honesty

that we're usually far less attentive. Maybe that's the lesson. It's a harsh one, but it'll be worth it if we stop cruising through the relationship.

We're due some happy thoughts for our next experiment. Yale University found that positive people live an average 7.5 years longer than certified grumps, and research that shows you're more successful and have stronger relationships when you increase the number of positive statements you make. So Jen and I exchange positives – career successes (her), ability to make pies (me).

"I love that you buy nice stuff for the house," I lie (we're on a positivity day – not a truth one), picking up one of the ludicrously expensive candles Jen collects.

"You're great with guests and visitors – like the gas man," she snipes.

This swapping of platitudes feels hollow, so I ask Jen when she felt most loved – and I'm surprised that last year's trip to Paris doesn't feature. "Anything where you involve yourself in things that matter to me," she says. "Visiting my parents for the weekend is my favourite." I'm damned if I'm going there this weekend – porn and massage are next on the menu and no way is that happening at Mr and Mrs Jen's – but we set a date for next month. I also start reading the same book as Jen (a small cheat since

I continue reading it on non-fasting days). Relationship therapist Dr Karen Sherman had told me that copying your partner is a way to make them feel loved. It works. Suddenly, I've got more ticks in boxes than Ipsos MORI. And this feels like so simple a breakthrough it's comical.

A GAME OF TOUCH

Scientists at University College London discovered this year that regular slow caresses between couples helped with an improved body image and self-belief for both partners. This is our cue for the next experiment. To gain a sense of closeness and being loved, research shows that we have to physically feel something.

And after a consultation with clinical sexologist Mike Lousada, it is clear this will require more than a pat on the bum. In fact, I learn that – outside the bedroom – I don't really know what Jen likes. "Sure you can say, 'If I do this she will probably reach an orgasm,' but that becomes predictable," says Lousada.

That night we're given a non-sexual exercise to improve our knowledge of what thrills one another. You try different kinds of touch with each other and grade responses on a scale of -3 ('ouch!') to +3 ('Yes, yes, yes!'). Lousada had told me. "Expose different areas – arms, backs, shoulders, hands – to feather-light stroking, gentle kneading, maybe even light pinching or pulling."

"If you tickle me, I'll hit you," says Jen. At first, I spend most of the time laughing or not feeling anything and initially it feels like a game. But once I'd stopped feeling self-conscious, it was revealing. We learn new pleasure points – and how to ignite them, spurred on by advice from New York sexologist Nan Wise. "Skin surfaces that aren't touched

HOW WAS IT FOR HER?

Some advice on what might work from a woman's point of view

I really enjoyed working out with Andy if he wasn't bossing me about, that is. I have more energy now, which is great for all sorts of things. Pornography was always going to be awful – I just don't find it sexy, but I think he was more embarrassed me.

The honesty was easy for me

I've always told Andy everything I thought anyway. I got fed up of all the quack advice, though. It's hard enough making him listen without all these other voices.

Some of the techniques helped The massages and learning the right way to speak to each other worked. But a lot of it just got in the way of the TV. The biggest

thing he learned is he doesn't have to lie to me (no shit, Sherlock).

There was one loophole to the experience

Despite the focus on truthfulness, I noticed Andy would avoid answering any trickier questions until a non-Extreme Honesty day. But then again... there's only so much truth a girl needs to hear, right?

regularly are more sensitive because they haven't been exposed to stimuli," she explains. "A light touch on the backs of the knees, nape or outside of the underarms can be very erogenous."

X-RATED MISTAKE

Getting your partner to touch you is easy – asking her to touch you as you watch porn isn't, even though research suggests it can be a good thing (honest!) In a study by one-time anti-porn theorist Dr Neil Malamuth, couples who watched small amounts of pornography experienced positive effects on their sex lives. As I throw open my laptop to a popular adult site, I am sceptical. I left my porn days at university – if you work from home, it's Kryptonite to productivity. Even so, I'm keeping an open mind.

As multiple images of flesh-meshing horror load up, Jen asks a question about one of the titles: "What's a 'DP'?" I suggest that it's possibly not erm... 'entry-level' material, but at her insistence I tell her what it means. Immediately, I wish I hadn't; the screen shifts from her lap on to mine. Unlike the other experiments, with porn we can't get past the initial embarrassment. Images that normally wouldn't faze me have me wincing when there's a woman I adore beside me. The laptop is soon shut and Jen leaves to watch TV downstairs. The only, "Oh my God!" I got was for all the wrong reasons.

HANDLING THE TRUTH

We are now past the halfway point in our month-long experiment and, porn aside, our version of the 5:2 diet is hitting the spot. We've only done five or six 'fasting' days, but now there's a rhythm to our weeks. We've started overlapping the experiments and I look forward to them: knowing we can speak the truth with (sort-of) impunity helps us to clear up problems, even if it causes one or two as well. "I only said it was doing you good to exercise," I say, foot in my mouth, as Jen's coming out the shower.

"You might as well have said I was fat," comes the reply, muffled by the slamming of the door.

"Good, good – at least we're being honest," I mutter to an empty room.

Later that day we get into some serious baby- and wedding-shaped questions. After five years, Jen wants a timeframe when man-child becomes baby-father and she's using our extreme honesty to get some answers, even if our first discussion ends in silence midway

through *EastEnders* (not replying isn't strictly a breach of the rules). I asked psychotherapist and marriage counsellor Mary-Jo Rapini about this after a few all-too-honest stalemates. "Instead of one person trying to win, establish a problem-solving team," she'd said. "Talk about a solvable problem without criticism. Focus on what you agree on, not what drives you apart."

We do want to get married and we do want a baby. And after we resume the conversation, we come to an agreement on when this can happen – after we've bought a house. We agree to speak to a mortgage advisor next week. Before this experiment, the second half of that conversation wouldn't have happened. Building structure into our relationship makes us confront issues and deal with them.

THE FINAL WEIGH-IN

As the experiment winds down, I've noticed that we're breaking our own rules. I'm more honest on days we're supposed to be 'off'. We're also exercising on days not designated for intimate fasting. The best part of working out together is that it kills the small talk. Normally, we're in contact all day – so when we go out for dinner there's nothing left to say. Getting a sweat on gets around that.

Not everything has worked. We'll never be able to watch porn together (We tried a female-friendly online channel, but it turned out to be a sweatier version of *Downton Abbey*). The other gripe I have is that much of the relationship advice you hear is girl-centred. At times, it felt as if I was just apologising, praising Jen and confessing while she just stood there nodding.

It was also very intense, but that's the point with the 5:2 principle. The best thing, however, is that it changes what 'normal' is. The positivity experiment expanded into our whole week and we're happier for it. Yesterday I wrote Jen a note telling her how much I fancy her, even when she's tired. I left it in her underwear drawer for extra effect. It worked and she was still beaming when we woke up this morning – and I have no idea whether it's a fasting day or not. 🍷

SHE'S HARD WORK (ON WEDNESDAYS AND SUNDAYS)

2014

20 MONDAY

21 TUESDAY

22 WEDNESDAY

23 THURSDAY

24 FRIDAY

25 SATURDAY

26 SUNDAY

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: GINA ANDERSON AT LHA REPRESENTS | HAIR AND MAKE-UP ASSISTANT: DANNI HOOKER AT LHA REPRESENTS | NAIL TECHNICIAN: STEPHANIE STAUNTON | STYLIST: VALENTINA TURBINI | MODELS: ANIKO AT NEXT MODEL MANAGEMENT AND MONTANA AT NEWS | DRKAREN SHERMAN.COM, MIKELOUSADA.COM, REVIVALBOOTCAMP.COM, MARYJO RAPINI.COM