



# THE STRESS EFFECT

WHEN PRESSURE TO PULL OFF THE PERFECT WEDDING TRIGGERED **KIERA CARTER'S** PAST EATING DISORDER, SHE HAD TO CHANGE HER APPROACH FOR THE HEALTHIER

**R**ight after my fiancé, Clint, popped the question on an island in Croatia, we hopped on our moped and did what any newly engaged couple would do (besides take selfies): We got pizza and wine. I savored every minute of that dinner, not just because the food was phenomenal but because the hole-in-the-wall pizzeria we had stumbled into seemed to magnify the beauty of the moment—the two of us alone in a quiet restaurant, where no one spoke English. But I knew that once our plates and glasses were empty, we'd share the news with our friends and family and the demands of wedding planning would begin. It was the calm before the storm.

I feared the stress of it all would trigger my once-unhealthy relationship with food, which began eight years ago in college and included symptoms of anorexia and bulimia. (The technical diagnosis was “eating disorder not otherwise specified.”) At the height of my obsession, I meticulously counted calories, limiting myself to just 500 a day, which I then burned off at the gym for what I considered a net total of zero. Once that inevitably proved unsustainable,

I started throwing up my meals. This cycle continued for about two years, as I justified to myself that it was only a temporary means to hit my completely arbitrary goal of 110 pounds.

Spoiler alert: It was never about the number on the scale. Once a therapist helped me connect my behavior to other stressors, like massive student-loan debt and not knowing what I wanted to do with my life, I began to make serious strides in recovery. I stopped restricting calories as a way to control the uncontrollable and rather decided to let my issues work themselves out gradually. Doing so helped me solidify a healthy relationship with food and exercise. Now I eat nutritional foods because they give me more energy, and I prefer hiking and biking with Clint to staring at the calorie counter on the elliptical by myself. Recovery was a process, but on the day of our engagement, I felt like I'd conquered my eating disorder.

**S**till, I was aware that this past struggle made me vulnerable to a relapse. So in the first few months of planning, I consciously fought against it. I ate more cake than usual just to prove to myself that I wouldn't regress. *Screw you, wedding diet*, I thought. *I'm not letting myself obsess about this stuff ever again.* I bought an A-line dress that would look flattering no matter what I weighed, and I sipped champagne whenever I felt like celebrating—sometimes on a random Wednesday night. *Cheers to me.*

Then, about a year into our engagement, other women in my life started talking about how *they* were going to extra lengths to shape up for *my* wedding. My mother avoided sweets for five weeks; one of my bridesmaids started doubling up on kickboxing classes; another was happy that her wisdom-tooth surgery prevented her from eating. No one told me to lose weight, but I couldn't help but feel like I wasn't doing

enough. Sure, I exercised regularly and ate a healthy diet, but internally I wondered, *Wasn't this the time to up the ante?*

Shortly after this realization, I started tracking my food consumption again and feeling a nagging pang of guilt if I missed a workout. Within a few weeks, I found myself sketchily waiting for a restaurant bathroom to clear out so I could purge the Italian dinner I had just

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shared with two of my bridesmaids. As I stood in front of the mirror, catching a glimpse of my red face and frazzled hair, I felt ashamed. I had done the very thing I was trying to avoid, and I suddenly longed to be carefree in Croatia again.

To be honest, this wasn't my first or only relapse since my initial recovery, but each one had something major in common: very high levels of stress. I used to think weddings triggered past eating disorders because of the increased emphasis on appearances, but that's only partly true. They're also a potent cocktail of long to-do lists, intense emotions, and family drama. It was simply too much for my recovery to handle.

Thankfully, I knew I could keep this a onetime thing if I addressed the problem early on. I thought back to that therapist who connected the dots to larger stressors and knew she would have told me to eliminate as much anxiety as possible. Eating disorder or not, obsessing over clashing shades of ivory (seriously, though, why so many shades?) and trying to make every hors d'oeuvre symbolic wasn't doing me—or my future marriage—any favors.

If my eating disorder stemmed from a desire for control, I realized it was time to let go. I started to accept my bridesmaid who never responds to emails for the wonderful friend and awful emailer she is, I stopped fighting

with my family about the catering menu, and I gave up my ambitious DIY goals. At the end of the day, my wedding would be better if I was happier and healthier.

Whenever I felt stress coming on, I went for a run with one of my bridesmaids, met friends for happy hour, or Netflix and chilled with my fiancé. By the time my wedding day arrived, I felt centered and loved. My stress-relieving

techniques involved spending time with the people I care about, so I look back on this as a time when I became closer to my friends and family—not a time when I agonized over Pinterest boards at my desk alone.

But you know what? If inspo overload is your thing, then do it up. You decide how to plan your own wedding. Whether it's about obsessing over every detail (or outsourcing the whole thing) or following certain traditions (or abandoning them), do it because it works for you and your marriage.

It can be hard to stick to your vision and limit stress, but forget the stuff that's not worth fighting for—the things that don't feel like you anyway. If everyone else had a crazy bachelorette but you'd rather do yoga in the woods, then go for it. If all your friends had cute crafts at their weddings but you hate DIY'ing, then hit up Minted and call it a day. More than anything, this time is about you and your partner forming

the foundation of a life together. All the other stuff should be icing on your three-tiered chocolate cake. That is, if cake's your thing, of course. And if it is, you can be sure that I would have a piece—with zero hesitation or guilt. **B**

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