A lot of us have been eating and drinking more in lockdown. Have you been able to maintain your healthy lifestyle?

Lockdown was disruptive, but I’d also just left Westminster, given up a team that provided me with a support network, and moved back to the Midlands, with only a month to set up a home office and start trying to live a commercial life, writing books and doing new things. So lockdown was up and down for me. The first month, I was doing Joe Wicks PE, but by the middle of lockdown, I’d gone into a slump. My routines were undermined and I developed a big cheese-eating habit! For my new podcast series, I’d interviewed Ned Palmer, the author of A Cheesemonger’s History of the British Isles. His enthusiasm for cheese was infectious and I was soon buying Mrs Kirkham’s Lancashire Cheese by the truckle!

My home office is 15 feet from the fridge, and I didn’t realise how much I was eating, so for the first time in three years, I put on weight. The gyms were closed, so I couldn’t compensate, and I got really worried. Now I’m through my cheese-eating phase, and I’m getting back on track. It shows that if your routines are disrupted, it’s easy to slip back, if you don’t address it.

In Downsizing you wrote that the lifestyle changes you made brought you closer to your Christian faith. What did you mean by that?

At the heart of it, it was the ability for reflection. I spent more time on my own, reflecting on my life and values. I was brought up Christian, and confirmed Christian, and went to a C of E school, and it put me back in touch with my faith in a way I wasn’t expecting. That came from the headspace to reflect more, at a deep level.

You’ve referred to your mum as having ‘that strand of Christian Socialism in her,’ and said, ‘that was a powerful force in my upbringing, though I didn’t know...’
‘I’ve never been more relieved that I left political life when I did!’

When I was born, the local vicar was a Marxist theologian. As a child, I didn’t realise it was unusual that your local vicar would’ve stood for the Communist party – but he did. He did a lot for the community and my mum thought he was wonderful. That twin track of Christianity and politics was all around me in my formative years, without me knowing the significance. It was only in adulthood, probably as I approached middle age, that I could work it all through more deeply.

What do you think of the way the Covid crisis has been handled? Is there anything you would have done differently?

I’ve never been more relieved that I left political life when I did! It’s virtually impossible for a public policy maker to make the right calls on a fast moving situation like the spread of a global pandemic. They’re making huge calls that impact on millions of people’s lives and cost the taxpayer billions, with only partial information.

It’s difficult, so I don’t want to apportion blame, but I would have locked down a week, maybe 10 days before we had the first proper lockdown. Having been on the cabinet sub-committee that dealt with avian flu, and having been the minister that had oversight of civil contingencies, I realise how making those early decisions can have a dramatic impact on the number of cases that develop.

Not having a track and trace system in place earlier has slowed up our ability to be resilient, and I’d have probably involved public health bodies and local authorities more in the development of it.

In May, the law on organ donation changed to the opt-out system. You proposed this in 2002: how did you feel when you heard the news?
It felt like my IQ had gone up.

the odd bet since my early working life. I’m not good at betting – I don’t win very often – but I don’t put much money on.

The Chief Executive of Flutter has said he wants a race to the top on responsible gambling, and I’m trying to find the best mechanisms to reassure the public that the harm caused by gambling to a small section of society are dealt with. It’s early days but I’m pleased they’re determined to get these arrangements right.

**Offering you a job might almost be viewed as a PR stunt – did you believe they really wanted to do better?**

Yeah, I’m definitely not a spokesman for the company, and I understood there was a degree of risk on my side – but there’s also a degree of risk on their side. You have to be convinced of their intention, and I was. A lot of the gambling reformers I’ve worked with have got in touch and said, ‘We hope you can do some good from the inside at Flutter.’ They’re one of the biggest companies in the UK and hopefully they can take their competitors with them in the reforms they make. I hope I’ll play a positive role there.

**After indulging over Christmas, what are your tips for losing weight in the New Year?**

Tiny changes over time have a powerful cumulative impact, but even tiny changes seem huge at the start. I decided to cut out as much sugar as possible, and that meant changing what I drank. I used to love Guinness and beer – now I drink wine and spirits. It means I drink less and I don’t feel as impacted by alcohol. When I drank beer, I got momentous hangovers – now I realise that’s probably sugar spikes. So if you’re starting in January, think about it beforehand. Don’t panic over Christmas – let yourself go with your loved ones, but get a plan in place. It could be as simple as cutting out sugar and giving yourself a steps target for the month. It doesn’t have to be dramatic to start the journey.

**Cutting out sugar can seem like a big step. What’s a good starting point?**

There’s low-hanging fruit, if I can use that metaphor! I used to eat KitKats and Mars Bars every time I went into the Members’ canteen in the House of Commons, and whenever I went into a coffee shop, I’d buy sugary pastries. I eliminated them and I replaced them – if I replaced them with anything – with nuts, but not peanuts! If you want to go further, I then moved from processed food to real food. As an MP, I’d get lots of takeaways, burgers on the go, and microwave meals. I moved to what you’d classically call meat and two veg, although these days I’d call it meat and five veg, because I eat lots of vegetables! That’s harder, because you have to find time to shop for the right food, prepare it, and in my case, remember the recipes. But the rewards are great.

**It wasn’t just losing weight – you found you had greater clarity of mind and more energy, didn’t you?**

I used to have broken sleep and go to the bathroom once or twice in the night. In the morning I’d wake up thinking, ‘What part of me aches the most?’ But when I cut out sugar and started mild exercise, my sleep improved. Sleep is medicine, so it had a great impact. I slept deeper and better – and in the morning, my brain was alert. It was like a lifting of brain fog. It felt like my IQ had gone up. I could remember facts and figures better and quicker, and I could think through complex ideas more deeply. Even now, if I eat processed food or carbs, I’ll feel mild brain fog, because there’s a relationship between food and cognitive health. I’m more focused and disciplined now. It’s the cognitive gains that I value the most and I never want to lose them.