

**Now we  
know...**

**WHY IS COMFORT FOOD  
SO COMFORTING?**

While some take the detox route for January, my strategy is to serve up comfort food as an accompaniment to the peace and quiet of the first month of the year. Chicken noodle soup with Thai-spiced broth. Lancashire hotpot topped with crispy, thin slices of spuds. Stewed apple with a cinnamon crumble lid. Even writing the names of these dishes makes me feel warm and cosy.

Why is comfort food so comforting? A 2011 study entitled *Chicken Soup Really Is Good for the Soul*, by associate professor of psychology Shira Gabriel and colleagues at the State University of New York at Buffalo, argues that comfort food, which they define as anything a person uses to feel better, “fulfils the need to belong”. So that could be an innocuous boiled egg and soldiers like Nanny used to make, or a high-fat, high-sugar parcel of fast food which brings you back to your eighth birthday party.

And this is where comfort food has problematic potential. As well as my love of a healthy home-cooked hotpot and a bowl of chicken noodle soup, I also harbour deeply embedded positive associations with Coco Pops and Happy Meals. Guess which ones I reach for when I’m feeling a little blue?

It seems there’s a difference between a healthy love of comfort food and a tendency towards comfort eating. Clinical

hypnotherapist Fiona Brennan is one half of Love Yourself Well (loveyourselfwell.ie), a programme she has developed alongside nutritional therapist Elsa Jones.

“When we enter into an internal conflict between the conscious and the subconscious minds,” explains Brennan when I ask her about junk food’s role in the comfort food arena, “the ‘pleasure’ of eating comfort food provides initial and temporary comfort that leads to long-term feelings of unhappiness and low self-esteem due to being overweight, and health issues.”

So how can we make sure our associations with comfort food stay on the positive side of life’s simple pleasures?

“Knowing our emotional triggers is key, so that we can act in advance of the automatic behaviour,” says Brennan. “The good news is that over time we condition our subconscious minds to seek new positive behaviour.”