

the proof of the pudding

Me and Eating

The eating starts, and I can't stop it. Every time I break my resolve, I whisper to myself, "Just a bite, a taste, one piece..." and I believe it. But always like a defiant runaway train, the velocity picks up until I crash into the wall of oblivion.

And then I'm hurt. Badly hurt. Just before the end I have a moment of triumph: "I can do anything I want. I deserve it. I need. I want. I have to have. Feed me. Give me. Love me."

Me Again

I am coming to the conclusion that my eating is an avoidance technique.

I'm starting to see how I avoid all sorts of unpleasant things by burying myself in bowl after bowl of ice cream and other foods. Something just takes over—it's as simple as that. And eating instead of owning up is so common for me, I don't even know I'm doing it.

I'm becoming aware, and it's painful but earth shaking.

But: what do I do now?

The Problem

Emotional eating. We all do it. No one escapes to a place where emotional eating isn't part of her life.

That's OK, because emotional eating doesn't pose a problem for everyone.

Eating when you're upset can help you feel better, without having any bad consequences.

Not everyone who eats for emotional reasons gains weight, or gets too fat for their own liking, or for their own good. Not everyone who eats away their hurt, or their anger, or their worries, seriously limits their ability to cope with their feelings in more adaptive ways.

Emotional eating is a problem for you when it causes problems for you.

Can't Stop the Eating

I have been confronting the mystery of my eating.

The question is, why is it so hard for me?

I'm starting to see the answer is within my grasp.

My method of inquiry into my eating problem consists of finding out the silent tune to which it dances.

Why do I say *silent* tune?

Because the inner workings of my eating problem are secret, even from me.

But when I pay a lot of attention, I see patterns woven into my overeating.

There is a sub-plot here. On a deeper level of my reality, it makes sense. So, why do I keep eating when all I want to do is lose weight?

Because that's not all I want to do. I also want to ease my pain, calm my tensions, feel satisfied, feel taken care of, and get some rewards out of life.

That is what the eating is for.

So Rewarding

After all the stress of work and family, I tell myself I deserve some happiness. For me, it translates into eating. This has become my way to relax and have fun.

You've probably heard this a million times, haven't you? But I don't know how to stop doing it. It's like nothing else except food will reward me the way I need to be rewarded.

There is a downside, of course. I hate the way I look, and the way I feel. But I just can't seem to give up the "eating to feel good."

It's a real conflict, and I'd love to hear how other women deal with this. It's such a challenge.

The Epidemic

There are alarming statistics showing that obesity rates in the world at large are at an all time high. No one seems to know what to do about it. Despite the last thirty years of low-fat food items on the market, despite the thousands of diets or weight-loss plans that are available, things have gotten much worse.

There are those that will tell you this obesity epidemic is due to fast, easy, fattening food being evermore readily available. Then there are those that say modern living with its lack of exercise is the culprit. True enough on both these counts.

And yet, we are each a mixture of our environment and our own personal make-up. It is what we bring to the world around us—as well as how the world around us affects us—that determines our behavior, our feelings, our attitudes, our dealings with everyday life.

Not everyone is overweight or obese. Not everyone eats fast food and junk food, even though it is everywhere we look. Not everyone eats too much and too often. If we were simply products of what is happening around us, we would all be in the same boat, wouldn't we?

While we might not have the power and influence to change the world, we can make personal changes so we are not as vulnerable to these outside influences that are no good for us.

Don't just look outside yourself and think it's no use. Look at who you really are, and start from there.

Food Fiend

Are you a food fiend? What exactly is a "food fiend"?

Answer with the first thing that comes to mind—yes or no?

Well, if you answered yes, the most important thing is what do *you* mean when you say yes you are a food fiend.

Here's how a few women who answered yes to the question described what they meant by it:

If there's a plate of cookies, I want to be sure I get the most.

When I come home from anywhere—doesn't matter how long I've been out, doesn't matter if I'm hungry or not—I dive into food.

All day long, especially when I'm on a diet, I think about my next meal.

I'm constantly on the lookout for the magic food that will make me thin. I've tried about fifty different things, none worked, so I keep trying.

I watch what other women eat like a hawk, particularly thin women. I sometimes write down what a thin woman eats at a restaurant, bite for bite.

I can't stand it when I miss out on eating something good. For instance, if I'm out to dinner and I pass up dessert to be "good", I always make up for it by stuffing sweets when I get home.

So would you describe yourself as a food fiend?

Held Captive by Food

Eating is a process governed by homeostatic mechanisms that maintain internal equilibrium. When you have been overeating and are overweight, you've eaten beyond your immediate homeostatic needs.

The pundits say, living in a food-abundant environment practically calls out to us to overeat, eat what's fattening, eat what will make us feel good, and forget the consequences. But are we simply slaves so that easy access to food makes us want to eat it even if we're not physically hungry? Is there really this insidious psychological impact that the "food environment" is having on us?

Just for the record (and to take some of the wind out of the pundits' sails), sure we're influenced, but do we have to be influenced to the point of succumbing? Look around you. Not everyone smokes. Not everyone drinks. Not everyone who drinks gets addicted. Don't you think it's the same with overeating? Not everyone overeats. Not everyone succumbs to easy access to fattening foods. But most of us—the 66% of us in the U.S. who are overweight (or obese)—are indeed looking like we're food captives.

But what if it was the other way around? What if we are holding food captive? If we're not physically hungry, what is it that we're feeding? Why is it that we're holding onto food so tightly? It's as if we've taken food over and made it into more than just a pleasurable way to take care of a physical need. If this is what you are doing, take a look and see what you are using food for.

...is in the eating

Sound Advice

Reduce your energy intake and improve the time you spend engaging in regular physical activity. These are the traditional words of advice. And sound advice it is. But it doesn't go far enough.

What if you have recurring episodes of emotional eating and a body mass index over 25, over 30, or even higher? Does the traditionally sound advice work for you?

A parallel: Suppose you are having trouble walking. There's pain and discomfort when you walk. What do you check out? Is it your shoes? If it is your shoes that are causing you pain, you do something about your shoes. Is it your sore big toe? If it is your toe, then you tend to your toe and not your shoes. If it is your ankle, then you do something about your ankle, and not your shoes or your toe. If it's your calf muscle... Well, you get the idea.

Now back to weight-loss facts:

If you gain and maintain because you can't refrain — from emotional eating, that is—
then guess what?

You gotta do something about how to curb emotional eating.

What Makes You Stay Overweight

What makes you stay an overweight woman? Could it be keeping things in that you don't want anyone else to know? Could your unwanted weight be the result of being emotionally clammed up? Your feelings and thoughts could be filling you up, especially if they have no place to go. Sound silly to you? There's more. Your excess weight could also be sheltering the feelings and thoughts you're afraid to share with others. In this case, weight is the shield, the berm, the impenetrable wall that keeps stuff in and helps you maintain secrecy.

If this is what you're doing, then losing some weight becomes shedding secrecy as well as shedding pounds.

It might not be easy for you to be open. Of course privacy is necessary. You have to keep some secrets about yourself. But—if it's a weight issue you're fighting, and you're trying to figure out what to do about it, see if concealing your feelings might be making you stay fat.

Warning: Being secretive and keeping emotional parts of yourself stuffed up inside can cause you to be overweight.

Near and Far

You look through a microscope to see little things.
You look through a telescope to see big things.

What are the small things related to your problems with eating and with controlling your weight? And how can you use your mind like a microscope to catch those small things that may not be visible to the naked (mind's) eye?

Just because things are small, it doesn't mean they aren't important. As it is in the world of quantum physics, small things mean a whole lot, and are actually a driving force. The smallest, most fleeting feeling can throw you totally off balance, and to regain your composure you turn to overeating or eating calorie dense foods. If you feel hurt by a very small, casual remark someone makes, you may not recognize that remark as having so much power—but quite often, it does.

Look through the lens of that microscope called your thinking cap, and see what you see. Little things, even if they operate just below your awareness, are worth investigating.

So, what about the big things? Well, for that you need to look through your mind's telescope, and bring them closer, so you can understand them better. Sometimes they are so big, and so far away, you can easily ignore them. For some people, the past is big and also far away, and they need to remember things, bring the past closer, take a good look, and see what secrets are buried there.

To solve a weight problem, you need to look near and far, take a big look and a little look, take a telescopic look as well as a microscopic look. The real answers are in both places.

The Function of Emotional Eating

Emotional eating serves some useful functions for you. And don't you ever forget it. You can dispute this all you want. But you'd get nowhere. Only when you can open yourself up to thinking about the value for you of emotional eating, only then will you be taking the first true step to doing something about it.

First, you have to face what you've been thinking of as maladaptive—your pattern of eating—and think of it as being adaptive in some way(s) for you.

Next, try to discover the reason(s) you made this adaptation of eating like there is no tomorrow or eating up all the sweets.

Want to make a little wager that at the heart of the matter will be something about you emotionally. What's adaptive about eating so much or eating so much comfort food that's no good for you, is that it *is* good for you.

Let's just take a quick case in point. If you're feeling anxious for instance, you usually have to find a way to discharge the anxiety, get rid of it before it affects you too much, or before it consumes you, which is the worst thing anxiety can do. It can eat you up. But before it eats you up, you eat it up—or rather you eat over it, just like you might smoke a cigarette or take alcohol or go on a shopping spree; anything to escape. You have to escape the anxiety, dampen its effect, or else. Or else what? Well, you don't want to find out “or else what”.

Eating over your anxiety becomes an adaptation you make. It is maladaptive because it contributes to unwanted weight gain, and to feeling bad about yourself. It is maladaptive because it keeps the same solution in place—eat over it, again and again—and doesn't lead to new, more adaptive solutions, such as facing down your anxiety so that it doesn't stay so powerful and influential.

stop

What Is Emotional Eating, and What Can You Do About It?

Suffice it to say, there is an emotional component to all eating experiences. We like what we eat. We despise what we just ate. We take pleasure in eating it. Eating last night was no fun at all.

Eating food doesn't just quell our hunger. It fills our minds with all sorts of ideas. We think of ourselves as stronger for having eaten the steak, and we like the way that makes us feel. Or we're excited about getting healthier because we ate dark greens. Eating can make us feel guilty. "I shouldn't have eaten the French fries." Eating can make us feel unhealthy. "Too much salt." Eating can make us feel all of our emotions.

We celebrate with food—holidays, birthdays, births, and on and on. Joyous feelings. We mourn with food that keeps our sadness in check. We just have to have a piece of whatever it is because of how it will make us feel. What about a snack before bed? We've earned this reward. Time for us to perk ourselves up. More food. More emotionalized eating.

Triggers

There are all kinds of emotional triggers for eating—situations, relationships, moods, thoughts, memories, feelings. You can probably break down triggers into two main categories: extrinsic and intrinsic. Sometimes something outside of you leads to you feeling like eating; at other times it is something inside you that does it. The smell of those delicious chicken wings gets you right where it hurts—memories of good times past. You want to celebrate these good

times again now, and so you have a hankering for some of those delicious-smelling chicken wings. That's an extrinsic trigger. A common intrinsic trigger is a mood state that you need to lift up, get away from, set aside, etc.

There's emotional eating, and there's emotional eating

So, if emotional eating is such a natural part of who we are, why is emotional eating such a bugaboo? Truth is, emotional eating is not bad when it's in the normal range. Emotional eating is bad for us when it causes us to gain unwanted weight, and we can't lose this weight because we keep eating to handle our emotions. Curiously, though, emotional eating in the normal range is not without its own weight gains. Everyday, garden-variety, normal emotional eaters do gain weight when they celebrate with food or if they are triggered by mood. The weight gain is not permanent, though, and the emotional eating is not permanent either for these people. It's temporary, situational, and circumscribed.

Besides not being able to lose your excess weight, emotional eating is bad for you when it doesn't allow you opportunities to develop more adaptive ways of dealing with your feelings. Feeling depressed? Eat over it. All well and good. But eating over it doesn't help you counteract the negative thinking, the all-or-none thinking, the terrible self-criticism, the low self-esteem, the bad memories, the longing, the loneliness, the dependency, all that goes into making you feel depressed.

What can you do about emotional eating?

First of all, you can recognize it for what it is.

In other words, you can tell yourself when you do the emotional eating thing, that you are doing it. Don't fool yourself into thinking you're hungry, or that it's time to eat, or any of those self-satisfying rationalizations. No good. You gotta tell it like it is. Emotional eating, that's what I'm doing. Labeling is always an interesting step. It's a process, really, not just a step. The process, as you will see, involves setting into motion your mental apparatus. Paying attention. Remembering. Sounding the alert. Talking to yourself. What's interesting about labeling is that it can stop you from doing something just by giving that something a label.

Since we're on the subject of labeling, why not make labeling your first step in curing yourself of emotional eating. It's a simple step, but a powerful one. It may not do the whole trick. Even if labeling your eating behavior as emotional just slows you down a bit. That's OK. Accept this small success. After all, your emotional eating is by now probably on automatic. So any interference with its automatic nature is not to be sneezed at. Small successes like this can be combined to form bigger achievements.

So much for labeling.

What's next?

Face it

After labeling, you could try facing your fear of whatever it was that triggered your impulse to emotionally eat. Yes, fear, you heard it right. Check it out and see for yourself.

Let's take feeling depressed again. OK, call it what you want—maybe you don't think you're depressed, and maybe you're not. You're just blue or down or sad or defeated or discouraged or disappointed. Your choice. Whatever. Facing your fear of feeling these negative emotions would nicely complement labeling. Emotional eating is your way of avoiding such emotions.

Here's what happens when you avoid these feelings. Each time you avoid, you are saying to yourself (sotto voce, perhaps) there is really something to avoid here. In other words, you are reinforcing your fear. Guess what? If you face your fear, in this case, your depressive (pardon the depressed diagnosis again) feelings, you're telling yourself there's not so much to be afraid of. You're making these emotions not loom so large, and be so scary.

What should "facing it" entail, you ask? First of all, facing means not avoiding, and avoiding the feeling is to eat over it or eat it out of existence. When you face, you approach, not avoid.

Summary, so far—label and face.

Practice

Next comes practice. It goes without saying. The more you practice, the better you get at what you're practicing. Lots of practice makes

lots of perfect. An approach you can practice is sticking with the feeling, getting it full force. This is the famous sink-or-swim method. You could, as an alternative, dip your big toe into the water, and start from there. Clinically, this is known as gradual exposure. Gradual exposure and full, sink-or-swim exposure are common psychological techniques used with all phobias (fears).

Rating

Need a tool? Here's a tool. When you're facing your fear, each time you face it— practice, practice, practice—you could gage how intense your fear is. Since fear is subjective—one woman's big fear is another woman's medium-sized fear—you can use a subjective rating scale. Let's make that scale from zero to one hundred. Zero is *no fear at all*. One hundred is *the most fear possible*. Of course—hopefully—you'll fall somewhere below one hundred. Just kidding about the hopefully. Of course you will.

Using the subjective rating scale, you can chart your practice sessions. X-axis, Y-axis, sort of thing. Remember those? Go practice session by practice session and rate your level of fear each time. If lots of practice makes lots of perfect, your fear level should decrease over time—over the number of practices, that is.

Summary: Label. Face. Practice. Rate.

See if this helps. It might not be *the* cure. You might need to get at your emotional eating in other ways as well. There's lots more you can do. Read on, and you'll see. But you might have taken a good first swipe at it with *label, face, practice, rate*. Hope that's the case.