

Healing the Emotions That Drive Over-Eating

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Food is far more than the calories and nutrients it contains. It is loaded with meaning. For some people, it represents comfort, safety, grounding, love. But it can also represent punishment, torment, and burden.

It is safe to say that for most of us living where food is diverse and plentiful, our eating behavior is determined as much by these emotional aspects as by pure physiological need. This is especially true for compulsive over-eaters.

"Eating disorders all have an emotional component. If you do not deal with the emotional aspects, you cannot really deal well with the physiological aspects of over-eating and obesity," says Ronald Stram, MD, director of the Center for Integrative Health & Healing, near Albany, NY. Dr. Stram has taken a special interest in working with the emotional and energetic aspects of over-eating.

He believes weight loss interventions focused solely on reducing or burning calories or changing macronutrient ratios are likely to fail because they do not address the subconscious drivers of over-eating.

Dr. Stram, who completed the University of Arizona's Fellowship in Integrative medicine, sees a few common "themes" among patients who over-eat: deep desire for comfort, fear of failure, struggles around control, an inability to love themselves unless they measure up to internalized standards of beauty, behavior or performance.

He pointed out that culturally, we Americans have deeply conflicted attitudes toward food, weight and health: on the one hand we revere models, athletes and film stars with their fat-free physiques; on the other hand, we bombard ourselves with media messages to consume ever-larger quantities of nutritionally empty food. Against this

backdrop, people develop their own idiosyncratic relationships with food.

It takes time and trust to begin to uncover each patient's emotional drivers for over-eating, but it is essential for long-term success, Dr. Stram told *Holistic Primary Care*. "Eating really is connected with a fundamental sense of being cared-for. It is natural to want that, but it can become very destructive. So part of what we try to do is re-direct that impulse toward things that really will promote well-being, rather than quick-fix foods that harm health."

Vicious Voices

Denise Lamothe, PsyD, author of the popular book, *The Taming of the Chew: A Holistic Guide to Stopping Compulsive Overeating* (Penguin), is a psychologist who specializes in working with women who over-eat. She brings a personal passion and deep insight that comes from her own years of struggle with over-eating.

She urges physicians to understand that most overweight over-eaters are painfully aware of the negative impact on their health. They're already deeply uncomfortable with their bodies (often a big part of the problem), and really do want to change. Your lectures and admonishments won't help someone who's tried dozens of diets, and long ago stopped counting the number of times she's vowed to change.

But something always happens when she goes past the donut shop. It goes something like this:

The *Saboteur*, who's bent on breaking her decision to get healthy, says "Dear, you've had *such* a rough day today. You know, you really do deserve a donut. Just one."

That "one" quickly becomes a box, at which point the *Critical Parent* steps up and chides, "There you go again, you self-indulgent little pig. Can't you ever control yourself? You screwed up AGAIN!"

At which point, the *Helpless Victim* sobs, "I'm so terrible, so weak. I have no will power at all. I'm just such a mess."

To which the *Saboteur* solicitously replies, "Oh, you poor thing. I know how hard it is for you. Hey, I have a great idea! Let's go get some cookies!"

Dr. Lamothe says most over-eaters will be familiar with some variant of this dialog. Over-eating is hard to break until clients recognize the specific emotional states that precede the binges, and the motives behind those various "voices."

"Try to help them to see for themselves what they're feeling just before they go for the donuts. Is it sadness? Frustration? Boredom? Loneliness? Anger? Worry? What are they unconsciously trying to soothe?" Once they can identify the feelings, help them find healthier alternatives—talking to a friend, walking, exercising, taking a hot bath, giving themselves a little extra free time—rather than reaching for the ice cream.

Dr. Lamothe pointed out that food marketers totally understand peoples' need for comfort, love, and pleasure, and they are extremely skillful at manipulating those needs, so they can sell more product.

Important Questions

Chronic over-eating occurs in a context. When working with an overweight, over-eating patient, it is important to learn as much as you can about her overall life situation. Don't just focus on the pounds and the portion sizes.

Dr. Lamothe recommends routinely asking about sleep patterns, exercise frequency, hydration, living conditions, favorite forms of recreation, family & relationship, occupation & financial situation, friends & social network, and spiritual practices. All of these influence eating behavior, and someone's responses will often shed unexpected light.

A patient may come in stating that she wants to lose weight. That's certainly a worthy goal, but it can be a front for deeper, more intimate needs.

"Underneath may be the desire to measure up to some ideal they hold, to win someone's approval, to like herself more, or to obtain someone else's love. Go deeper and you may discover that what a patient *really* wants is simply to be more joyful, to have more energy, to be healthier, more vital, to live a more balanced life. Tap into this and sometimes the weight loss happens of its own accord because the person is naturally moving toward healthier food choices and healthier behavior," Dr. Lamothe told *Holistic Primary Care*.

Be Mindful, Not Obsessive

You won't get to those deeper levels by focusing on meal plans and calorie counts. Dr. Lamothe says it is best to drop the idea of "ideal weight," and focus instead on getting healthy. Rather than dictating target weights & diet plans, try to guide patients toward clarifying their own goals and developing their own comprehensive plans for creating better health.

Encourage people to be more mindful of what and how they eat, but be judicious in recommending calorie counts and food diaries. "It can sometimes be useful to track one's eating for a week, because some people do a lot of unconscious eating without ever realizing it. But in general, I don't want people to be obsessing over food. Calorie counting can be very problematic when it becomes obsessive, as it often does."

Over the years, Dr. Lamothe says she has seen clients successfully lose weight with a variety of different diets, including Ann Louise Gittleman's Fat Flush Plan, the Schwarzbain Principle, the South Beach Diet, and others. But the diets are only one aspect of a holistic approach. Chronic over-eaters really need to become conscious of what motivates their over-eating before they can make lasting changes.

Help From Nature

Both Dr. Lamothe and Dr. Stram have found a valuable therapeutic ally in the Bach Flower Remedies, developed by British physician Edward Bach, in the 1920s and 30s.

Based on similar principles as homeopathy, the flower remedies are based on Dr. Bach's careful observation of the traits, tendencies, and behaviors of common flowering plants & trees. Bach believed strongly that a person's attitudes and emotional states were key determinants of health, illness and capacity for healing. He sought ways to harness the particular traits and energies of the plants to positively influence his patients' emotions.

Bach developed a series of 38 remedies, as well as a detailed evaluation questionnaire for determining which ones best suit which patients. Today, the Bach remedies are used by millions of patients and practitioners worldwide, the most popular being "Rescue Remedy," for stress relief (If you're unfamiliar with it, just ask a few of your female patients!).

"I started using them during my fellowship back in 2001, and I found them to be extremely safe and effective adjuncts for helping people deal with sleep disorders, worry, uncontrollable rambling thoughts, anxiety, and other emotional stuff that tends to accompany serious physical illnesses," said Dr. Stram.

He stressed that the remedies are not so much curative therapies for physical diseases as tools to help balance peoples' emotional states. "It is not a directly physical effect. It is more along the lines of what happens when people practice Jon Kabat Zinn's Mindfulness Meditation: they reduce their anxiety, fear, stress, and this somehow facilitates a measurable reduction in physical symptoms."

Several of the Bach remedies are very well-suited to managing the emotions associated with over-eating. Dr. Stram said he often uses *Aspen* (*Populus tremula*) for patients who feel timid, frightened and anxious, and who eat to get a sense of grounding, solidity and confidence. *Chicory* (*Cichorium intybus*) is useful for people who focus on caring for others at the expense of themselves, and then compensate by filling themselves with food.

Dr. Lamothe has worked with the flower remedies for many years. She usually has her clients take the Bach Remedy questionnaire and then combines the most appropriate remedies into customized blends tailored to each patient's specific emotional profiles.

She recently worked closely with the Nelsons company, distributor of the Bach remedies, to develop a kit comprising several remedies specifically for people struggling with emotionally-driven eating. "They asked me what I thought were the three most important of Dr. Bach's 38 original remedies for dealing with the issues around overeating."

The three she chose were: *Crab Apple* (*Malus pumilia*), which she says is helpful for people who have very poor self-image and hate their bodies (a common finding among over-eaters); *Cherry Plum* (*Prunus cerasifera*), for anxiety around self-control or lack thereof; and *Chestnut Bud* (*Aesculus hippocastinum*), which helps people learn from past mistakes and break useless repeating patterns.

Nelsons launched the innovative *Emotional Eating Support Kit* last Spring, along with a website, www.emotionaleatinghelp.org, that features a wealth of patient-friendly tips on how to uncover the emotional drivers of binge-eating and how to break the vicious cycles.

Dr. Lamothe said holistically-minded doctors can be a great help to people struggling with over-eating, a problem for which conventional medicine has little to offer other than finger-pointing, scary statistics, and extreme measures like bariatric surgery.

"Try to be compassionate and non-judgmental. Identify and emphasize the positive healthful things a patient is already doing and build on that. Encourage them to move, to stay hydrated (many people misread thirst as hunger), to participate in group exercise activities like yoga or whatever they really enjoy."

Whatever you do, keep in mind that as a medical authority, your words and attitudes may have a lot of unconscious impact. If you are harsh and judgmental, you only reinforce a patient's sense of failure, weakness and victimhood, which plays right into the over-eating cycle. Use your words and your influence to empower. "Never let a patient leave your office feeling discouraged." ☺

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