

What's Driving Your Eating?

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There is thorough and outstanding evidence regarding the increase in Australia's level of obesity and the projected outcomes if this is not addressed. Children in particular are noted as being especially at risk of future long term health problems. While dietary restraint, more nutritious eating habits and physical exercise have always been purported to be the answer to the obesity crisis in adults, adolescents and children, long term meta analysis and follow-up studies indicate that weight loss is not maintained (and indeed the more time that elapses between the end of a diet and the follow-up, the more weight is regained, Mann et al., 2007). Unfortunately, several other studies indicate that dieting is actually a consistent predictor of future weight gain.

A recent study conducted by Patricia Goodspeed Grant (2008) involved investigating the psychological, cultural and social contributions to overeating in obese people. **She found that eating for comfort for the morbidly obese is rooted in using food to manage experiences of emotional pain and difficult family and social relationships.** Her participants reported that what had been missing from all treatment programs they had tried was the **"opportunity to work on the psychological issues concurrently with weight loss"**.

It appears that a missing link in the treatment of overweight and obesity is this concept and issue of addressing the psychological contributors or emotional drivers that are leading people to overeat. Relying on willpower and education is clearly not enough.

Humans are only motivated by feelings (i.e. sensations). There are basically three types of feelings; **pleasant, neutral and unpleasant**. The motivation we get from the unpleasant feeling is **to move towards a feeling we do not have, but do want**. We move away from the unpleasant feeling by replacing it with a different pleasant (or neutral) feeling.

Hunger, is an unpleasant sensation (for most people) and is relieved by the pleasant sensation (for most people) of eating and the taste of food. Like other basic functions, this is so that we can survive,

individually and as a species. Most of us prefer pleasant sensations over unpleasant sensations. But pleasant sensations are not always matched with the outcome that they were designed for. **Many people eat, not because they need nutrition, but because they feel an unpleasant emotion, like rejection, loneliness, distress, depression, fear, betrayal, worthlessness, defeat, helplessness or hopelessness.** This emotional over-consumption of food often leads to fat-gain and other health problems. This can then create a vicious cycle of more emotional eating to manage the emotional consequences of becoming overweight and unhealthy.

For children, excessive eating and bingeing are often a consequence of boredom and habit behaviours. Food or drinks are used to relieve the monotony. They can also be used as a coping strategy to deal with problems arising from anxiety, depression, stress and conflicts. Although they may feel comforted after consuming excessive food, the person has not dealt with the underlying cause of these problems. This sets up a reward cycle of using food to get a better feeling. Consequently, there is no reason why they will not **reoccur** in the future. This can become a vicious cycle.

If a parent deals with their own emotional issues by eating and or over eating it is highly probable that the child will also do so. This pattern for coping is being modelled. Parents often find it difficult to tolerate their child's disappointment or pain and are motivated to take this way. If food is used regularly as a means of doing this eg. "never mind not getting invited let's go get a chocolate sunday" a parent can be setting up a cycle of soothing uncomfortable feelings with the pleasure of food. This again can set up a pattern of eating to manage feelings. This is particularly a problem when there is no real discussion of the child's pain or disappointment with them and food is just offered.

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Many people suffer from food cravings at times when they are having a strong feeling. Others report a history of feeling criticized and judged by important others for their choices or the way they look, eat or feel. Feelings of shame and guilt about eating behaviours, looks or perceived lack of control are also common for people. Others report anger and annoyance that to be the shape they want, they have to eat differently to others and feel deprived (victimized/ not normal). Many are afraid to change their shape because this has helped them hide or be protected them from hurt or intimacy. Many have tried changing their body shape so many times they don't believe they can succeed, or feel undeserving of success because they have a deep seated sense of unworthiness..

Some useful questions to ask yourself that might help you find some of your "limiting" beliefs or issues to work on include:

- Do you remember any times you were ashamed about your body or had others say things about you that you felt ashamed of yourself?
- When was the last time you were at your goal weight/shape? What was happening at that time?
- What are your attitudes about overweight people? What were the attitudes of important others about overweight people?
- What patterns exist in your family about food? Was it used to show love or as a punishment?
- What statements do you say to yourself that are self defeating, hurtful and holding you back from getting what you want.
 - Eg: It's in my genes,
 - I've never been slim so I can't be
 - I'll always be fat
 - I'm the fat funny one
 - If I let anyone get close to me they will hurt me
 - My friends/family won't like me anymore
- What are the benefits of staying overweight?
- What do you have to give up to achieve your goal?
- Do you use food as your main reward either for yourself or your children?

Read these questions out loud then sit quietly and listen to what you say to yourself. Write down your answers. Remember, the more honest you are with your thoughts and feelings, the more profound change you are able to achieve.

Changing The Drivers

Recent psychological research suggests that people are able to change throughout their lives –you probably behave differently now in your life compared to 10 years ago, and across different situations. But it is more difficult to **change** for someone else. Change is best tackled when you feel ready for it personally, not when someone else says you need to change.

Despite this, change can be interesting, difficult in some cases and sometimes uncomfortable. There was an article written in 1986 and its title said everything: *A fate worse than death: The fear of changing*. And if you have had a habit for some time in your life and want to change it, it can present all sorts of issues!

Changing patterns, thoughts, feelings and behaviours in relation to not eating well, or body image concerns, can be a daunting task. How you approach it is vitally important for success in the long run. Here are some tips for getting the change you want with eating and emotional issues:

Tip 1. Take stock of past experiences

Think about 3 major attitudinal or behavioural changes that you have made so far in your life? Think about what was happening at that time (were you working or at school? What were you doing? Who was around you?) Did the changes come about when you were feeling cared for, or because you felt threatened?

Tip 2. Face the fear

What are your **fears** about changing your eating and body image concerns? Think about what **exactly** it is that you are trying to change? What will life be like without these concerns and behaviours? Brainstorm as many possibilities as you can as these will form the basis for what you become.

Tip 3. Comfort versus Sacrifice

Ask yourself what are you willing to pay for to get what you want? Sometimes the comfort of staying where we are in life and not changing is more appealing – but only in the short term. If things need to change with your eating and body concerns, what are you willing to start with at least in the beginning?

Tip 4. Seek Help

Dieting and exercise are helpful however if you have found some significant issues by answering the questions earlier then you may have found your missing key to what keeps sabotaging your success. If dealing with these alone does not work then see a psychologist or counsellor to help you to resolve these limiting beliefs or patterns.

Tip 5. Children

If you feel you have been modelling emotional eating for your children or consistently taking away their pain or disappointment with food try changing the pattern. Talk about and listen to their feelings. Try offering your time to listen and be with them as the comfort. You will help them develop a sense of emotional resilience and set up a new pattern of reaching out to loved ones when they are hurting.

References:

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Dr Peta Stapleton and Terri Sheldon are two well known Australian psychologists with 35 years of combined clinical experience. They have developed the SlimMinds Program that teaches the latest effective psychological techniques to break out of that YoYo failure cycle that so often occurs with traditional weight loss programs. See www.slimminds.com