



ARE YOU EATING YOUR FEELINGS AWAY?

By Yvonne Thomas, Ph.D.

In last month's article, I wrote about the "yo-yo" phenomenon whereby people repeatedly keep gaining and losing extra weight. Now, I will address some of the REASONS why people may overeat in the first place, as well as how to not give in.

Often, overeating can happen when people feel EMOTIONALLY, rather than PHYSICALLY, hungry. EMOTIONAL hunger occurs when a person may overeat in response to feeling too little, feeling too much, or even ACCURATELY feeling what his/her emotions are. Regardless of which of these situations the person is in, he/she may feel uncomfortable and seek relief through overeating, which can cover up one's discomfort and the underlying feelings attached to that. For example, people may overindulge with food when they are not in touch with their emotions and may be feeling too LITTLE, such as boredom or emptiness emotionally. In actuality, they may be experiencing OTHER emotions unbeknownst to them, including depression, loneliness, sadness, or disappointment. Conversely, a person can overeat when feeling too MUCH, such as depression, anxiety, agitation, and restlessness, along with other underlying, UNIDENTIFIED emotions including anger, sadness, stress, fear, guilt, shame, or frustration. And then there are times when a person may KNOW what he/she is feeling, but still is experiencing enough discomfort that food is used to numb out the recognized emotions.

Another reason why people may overeat is that they may have seen this kind of behavior role-modeled for them in their homes when they were growing up. One may have recurrently witnessed one or both parents using food as a "COPING MECHANISM" to deal with stress, life's upsets, etc. Thus, one may subconsciously use the same behavior in his/her life when faced with one's own disquieting feelings and situations.

In addition, people may overindulge with food due to the mere fact that food is NOT AN OPTION – we all need food to survive. So, unlike an alcoholic, drug abuser, or smoker who has the CHOICE on some level of drinking, doing drugs, or smoking again, the overeater cannot PERMANENTLY never eat again. Thus, the overeater must walk that fine line of continuing to eat for his/her sustenance, while not eating too much. Also, it can be difficult for people IN GENERAL to continually withstand the temptations of our instant gratification, fast-paced type of society. With food commercials and billboards and fast-food venues all around us, it is so easy to "take the easy way out" and eat whatever is quick, affordable, and most accessible.

There may be different reasons for why one may overeat, yet all share something in common: they each provide the short-term gain of some emotional relief, but NONE OF THEM actually helps a person learn how to feel one's feelings and directly deal with them. Thus, a person can get the "positive" reinforcement to keep "eating one's emotions away," but also gets the long-term damage of extra weight gain, feeling bad about oneself for overeating, and remaining ill-equipped to deal with one's emotions and related issues.

Ways to decrease the urge to overindulge include trying to eat only when you are physically (not emotionally) hungry, and, if you are emotionally hungry, identify WHAT you are feeling and WHY you are feeling that/those emotion/s. This insight alone may decrease the overeating urge. If not, try to eat only a bit of what you are craving and then distract yourself with some pre-planned alternative (i.e., take a walk, talk to a close friend or family member, have a calming bath/shower, and/or write about what you are feeling and why to mitigate the urge to overeat). If these tips do not adequately decrease the need to overeat, talking to a Psychologist specializing in these areas can be very helpful.

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