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Mental Health Quick Notes

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Battle with Food

Many people battle mightily to get a difficult relationship with food under some sort of control. They know that there is a lot of confusion around how, when, and what they feed themselves. Sorting out the issues and establishing a less distressing relationship with food can seem to some, to be an impossibility. They promise themselves diets, exercise routines, and “finally” getting the problem under control. Sadly, however, many find themselves discouraged by setback after setback in gaining the desired control and achieving a desirable weight. This is in part, because of the mistaken ways in which we tend to think about how to solve a confused relationship with food. In this article, we will be discussing why we eat, and how we can shift our thinking and behavior toward resolution of this difficult struggle.

What Gets Us Eating?

It was once said that the person who is happy “sleeps when tired, and eats when hungry.” Yet it is so very common that, for a variety of reasons, we eat food when we are not actually feeling physical hunger. The triggers to eat may come from either the outside (“it is lunchtime”) or from inside (“I’m bored”). We may eat “because” we are at a party and there is cake, or “because” we are at the movies and there is popcorn. Or we may eat “because” we are feeling low or lonely. Eating which is triggered by the desire to manage feelings is called *emotional eating*. Emotional eating is perfectly normal behavior. We have all eaten to comfort ourselves, to soothe an uncomfortable feeling, or even to reward ourselves in some way. This is only a problem if it becomes an out of control pattern. That is, if we are misusing food as the “cure all” for life’s emotional challenges, routinely eating an entire family-sized bag of candy or chips out of boredom, or sneaking a dozen donuts because we are depressed.

Often, after people binge eat as a way to manage, or even “stuff” their feelings, they shift from being upset about something to being angry with themselves. Then, they often focus on their shame and guilt, and make promises to “do better tomorrow”. In addition to the health and mood issues, this is a problem because this pattern reflects ineffective management of our feelings, and inadequate resolution of the issues/problems that caused the feelings in the first place. This pattern leaves us swirling in a struggle with ourselves for control over food, rather than actually managing our lives more effectively.

Some non-hunger based eating is in response to triggers from outside ourselves. For example, when we consume far more than we were hungry for, say at a restaurant with huge portions, the trigger was the presence of food. Another example of an external cue would be when one looks to see if the clock reads “noon” to decide if they are hungry for lunch. They are not attending to what their stomach is telling them. These behaviors may, of themselves not represent a problem; we only want to invite awareness of the difference between hunger and non-hunger based eating.

Learning to Listen to our Bodies

Just as we often do not listen to our internal cues of hunger, many of us also fail to notice our internal cues that we are satisfied and are no longer hungry. We’ll eat all that we are served, regardless of the reality that the portion size was not determined by our need, but by an external factor. Or, we’ll just keep eating because the food is so tasty! Again, this is neither a problem nor abnormal behavior. But we can become much more conscious of our true need for food. We can begin to notice that we can attend to the internal cues of satiety, telling us that we’ve eaten enough to satisfy our hunger. Some writers talk about imagining our hunger to be on a scale of 1 – 10. A “one” represents feeling totally famished, and a “ten”, “completely stuffed”. When we are feeling neither particularly hungry nor fed, that would be a “five”. If we learn to begin to eat when we are “below the five” and stop eating before we get to the

highest numbers, we will actually begin to feed ourselves in a way which is in line with our body’s truth, and we can learn to make that a habit! This can be a challenge if one has been eating mainly based on external cues. But this shift in awareness and behavior can be made, and may be freeing. But, as with any habit change, it takes time, repetition, and patience with ourselves.

Why Diets Don’t Work

Rather than try to make the change described above, most of us go about trying to gain control with food by going on some sort of a strictly restrictive diet. While we do need to be mindful and honest about nutrition, strict dieting for weight loss actually often proves ineffective. We become bored, feel deprived, feel resentful, and, of course, eat something not “dietetic” and then feel defeated. Research shows that dieters frequently think about their eating in “all or nothing” terms, and too often feel that if they’ve eating something “bad” (meaning, not on their diet), that they’ve “blown it”, give up, eat in an out of control way, and promise themselves they will start the diet anew “tomorrow”. Dieters often end up with a very harsh internal voice which criticizes them for eating anything thought of as “bad”. It is hard not to end up on the pendulum swing between guilt, shame, and the desire to rebel against the diet. There can also be resentment over a naive understanding of how “normals” eat, imagining that they can eat whatever, and as much, as they desire. All this can lead to discouragement, and a failure to get out of the binge/diet cycle.

A Lifelong Shift

Many people have come to appreciate that the key to lifetime weight loss/management, is to work with a kind of mature accountability to oneself about what, and how much, one is eating. It is kind of like keeping your checkbook; if you take out more money than is in it, you’ll bounce a check. If we consume more calories than our bodies need, we’ll gain weight. So if we can become honest with ourselves by lovingly and kindly confronting what and how much we are eating, we can begin to have a calm and self-nurturing attitude toward healthy eating, rather than a guilty child’s mindset about going on, or “breaking”, a diet. If we’ve made this shift, and, for example, enjoyed an unplanned doughnut at the office, there is no need to conclude “I’ve blown my diet, bad me, what the heck...I’ll start the diet again tomorrow”. Just enjoy the doughnut, and if you are trying to lose weight, gently and kindly be honest about your pattern of food intake. How many calories am I eating? How does that fit into the balance I am trying to achieve? Am I eating from the various food groups? How about the fruits and vegetables?

When we combine hunger based eating with gentle nutrition, a freedom from rigid “shoulds”, harsh self-criticism, and needless guilt, can be found. In short, our relationship with food can reflect a more honest relationship with ourselves. This is honesty about our true hunger coupled with becoming truthful about what we are feeding ourselves.

What About Emotional Eating?

As stated above, it is perfectly normal to sometimes turn to food to help us manage our feelings. Again, if our goal is an increasingly honest relationship with ourselves, if we are going to sometimes eat for comfort, we want to do so in a way which leaves us feeling, in fact, comforted, rather than furious with ourselves. Step one is to learn to listen to our emotions, if feeling lonely, perhaps we should make contact with a friend, or do something that reminds us that life can be fun, even if we are alone. If we’re angry, maybe we need to begin to figure out a better way to take care of whatever is upsetting us rather than turning that on ourselves with too many calories of candy coupled with the inevitable self recrimination. And if, after beginning to make our feelings known (and accepted) to ourselves, we still want to feed ourselves to give comfort, we can do so in a way that is calm, choiceful, and will not leave us angry or disappointed.

Going Home for the Holidays

It is very freeing to begin to become more "emotionally intelligent", and to read our own feelings with greater accuracy. And, in a parallel way, it is freeing to re-set our eating patterns so that they actually reflect knowledge of our body and it's needs.

Getting this all sorted out can be difficult. A therapist with familiarity in this area can be of great help. But once achieved, the habit of eating with increased confidence and greater trust in ourselves, can be profoundly liberating.

Submitted by Janet Frankel Staub, LCSW

Going Home for the Holidays

You could be planning a cross-country plane trip to see your parents or walking across the street to your sister's house for Thanksgiving dinner and the situation would be the same. You do not have to go "over the river and through the woods" to have trepidation about going home for the holidays or any other time of the year. When families get together in a purposeful way these meetings are ripe for old patterns and problems to arise. However, they are also ripe for change, new patterns and healing old wounds. As adults, we are no longer dependent on our parents for food, shelter and emotional support and so we have the ability to step back from our families, look at the way we interact with them and change our roles.

Some may ask, "Why should I try to do anything different? Don't people change only when they want to change?" In fact, going back to your family on holidays is not about expecting your family to change. If your father always thought your chosen profession was a ridiculous way to make living, your visit to him will probably not have him asking you all about your promotion. Likewise, if your sister always has a personal crisis going on that sucks the life out of the family; do not expect that to change in a holiday visit. Adjusting your expectations from them changing, to you reacting differently, will help you go home with the right mind set. You will take a step towards a new maturity that does not blame and nor resent your family members for what they have not given you or how they may have harmed you.

So what is the pay off for changing the way that one reacts to one's family patterns or ways of handling situations? Sometimes accepting one's role in the family without trying to amend it makes sense, especially if you are happy with the way that you relate to each member, or if you do not want to give up a certain role in the family (e.g. the irresponsible one, the reliable one, the outsider). Maybe you just do not like to "rock the boat". However, it is useful to consider that the quality of your relationship with your family (parents, siblings, et. al) can be considered one of the very best indicators of your current emotional life (Carter & Peters, 1996). So if you are looking for more meaning in your relationships with your spouse, your kids and friends, going home for the holidays with a plan might be a step in that direction. For example, if you grew up with a childish mother you may have learned to behave over responsibly in adult relationships. If you had a bullish father you may have adopted some his bullish ways and, under stress, may use them in your own marriage. A good litmus test for whether one may consider trying a new course of action in going home for the holidays could be the following: the more that you are cut off from family members the more you tend to be reactive and intense in your other relationships (Lerner, 1985). So if you are always blowing up at your kids or constantly getting your feelings hurt by co-workers and you have a distant or nonexistent relationship with a parent or sibling, a different strategy in dealing with your extended family may be needed.

Constructing a plan for your visit is the first step. This may entail making con-

tacts before the visit. Most families have well entrenched patterns on how purposeful family events occur. Someone is usually responsible for issuing invitations, someone hosts the affair, someone plans the menu and so on. This can all be coordinated by one person or many people but their usually is a pattern. Defining this pattern, and the role that one plays in this pattern, is the first step in changing it. If you are the one that just shows up and partakes, then a call to the planner with an offer to help may be a good first step. If you always host every purposeful family get together, asking another member to do so would definitely help to start the process of taking one out of the over-achiever role.

If relationships are in strain between yourself and one of your family members, contact prior to the family get together may seek to change the status quo. A short telephone call or letter to a brother that you have lost contact with since his divorce telling him that you hope to see him over the holidays could be the beginning of something new between the two of you.

Planning for the actual event is also important. Start small. You may have the goal of spending five minutes alone with your father and asking him about himself or not commenting when your mother starts to gossip about your siblings when they are in the other room. These plans should be specific to the role that you have in the family and should address areas that keep you feeling stuck and aloof from family members.

However, be prepared for the likely result of "rocking the family boat". Remember that with every action there is always a reaction. Family patterns are what keep the boat afloat and so if you try to take one family member to the side the other family members will be afraid the boat might tip. To prevent absorbing other family member's anxieties about your new actions remember the following:

- 1) Avoid blaming others (Sis, why do you always have to make me into the bad person?).
- 2) Do not defend, explain, or apologize for your new position (I am sorry I did not spend more time with you Mom. I just feel so bad that I never see my brothers.).

Both of these tactics one can achieve by taking an "I" position (e.g. "I don't feel comfortable talking about dad without him in the room." "This is not how I raise my child but I appreciate you trying to keep her safe."). By standing your ground but in a loving way most family members will eventually accept the change and you can grow emotionally. Many people have reported that after gaining some success in changing the way they react in their family they have found new simultaneous success in other personal and professional relationships (Nichols, 2006).

If you feel like you may need some help in changing patterns with your family consult with a therapist who has experience with this type of work.

Submitted by Tracy M. Richards, LCSW, LMFT

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