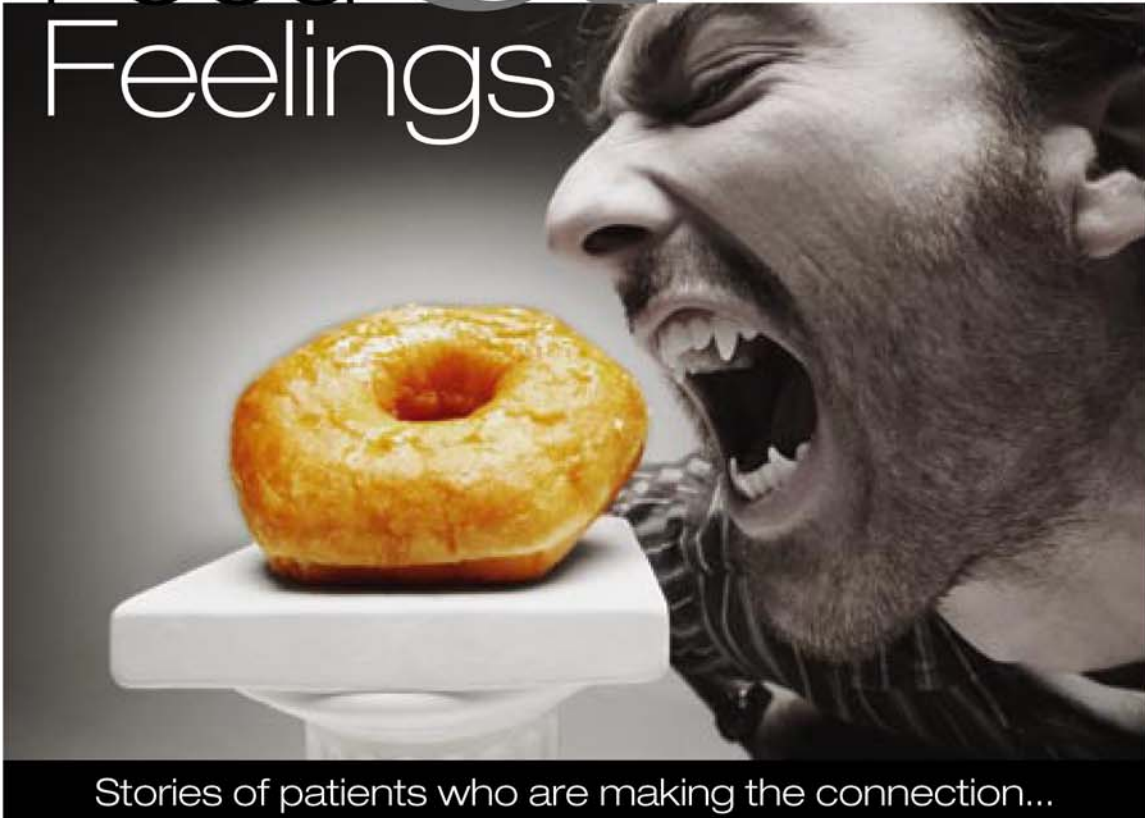




# Food & Feelings



Stories of patients who are making the connection...

by Louisa Latela, MSW, LCSW

“I’M REALLY PISSED OFF THAT I CAN’T EAT LIKE I USED TO. WHY AM I FEELING LIKE THIS? I THOUGHT I WANTED THIS MORE THAN ANYTHING. I USED TO DREAM AND PRAY FOR THE DAY THAT I DIDN’T FEEL SO ADDICTED TO FOOD. NOW THAT IT HAS HAPPENED I AM ANGRY, BECAUSE I FEEL MORE ADDICTED THAN EVER, BUT THE FOOD ISN’T DOING IT FOR ME LIKE IT ONCE DID... I USED TO BE ABLE TO COUNT ON MY FOOD. I KNEW AFTER A STRESSFUL DAY AT WORK I COULD COME HOME AND RID MYSELF OF ALL MY FRUSTRATIONS WITH A BIG BOWL OF PASTA, SAUSAGE, MEATBALLS, GARLIC BREAD, AND A FEW SODAS. I WOULD HAVE THAT FULL, COMFORTABLE, NURTURED FEELING. I CAN’T DO THAT ANY MORE.

**I AM STUCK WITH MYSELF.**



I don't know what to do with all of these feelings. I am angry that I can't eat like I used to. I don't get that rush or that comfortable feeling even if I try to push the envelope and overeat. I know on a deeper level I really do not want to gain back any weight I've lost and, ultimately, I am grateful that I cannot eat like I once could. But, some days I just long to be able to escape, to numb out, and on those days I find myself obsessing about food. I think about it all day long. I actually start to hide my eating from those I have asked to help me with my weight loss. I have spent an entire lifetime numbing out and avoiding dealing with my feelings on my own. I feel so inadequate or unequipped when it comes to dealing with uncomfortable emotions. I always thought a person was weak if they showed emotions or had to ask for help. Sometimes it really sucks being stuck with me, but I do know that is where my power ultimately lies."

This was a journal entry a client recently shared with me. We spent the session processing his feelings of anger, fear, and grief. This client, Bill, is a 47-year-old male. He weighed 478 pounds the day of surgery. He had his surgery on March 2, 2005, and has lost 75 pounds to date. I had worked with him for a few months before he had his surgery. He does not have a car, and traveling was often difficult for him. My office was less than two blocks from public transportation, but that was too far for him to walk without getting short of breath and having severe leg and ankle pain so we did most of our sessions over the phone.

During the months leading up to surgery Bill became acutely aware of when he overate in reaction to feelings like anxiety, stress, anger, or boredom. He had a very good understanding that surgery was just a tool and not a cure for weight loss. In order for him to maximize his chances for long term weight loss he would have to follow through with a comprehensive aftercare plan that

included group support, follow-up with a primary care physician familiar with weight loss surgery, a realistic exercise plan, and guidance in creating new behaviors and lifestyle changes.

I had spoken to Bill twice shortly after his surgery, then I hadn't heard from him for quite some time. I decided to give him a call let him know I was doing a workshop for weight loss surgery patients, in case he was interested in attending. I also wanted to just check in and see how he was doing. He was surprised to hear from me. He admitted he had thought of calling several times, but didn't want to have to "face the music." He had been in the honeymoon phase in the early months following his surgery. Weight had been falling away with what seemed to be little or no effort. He wasn't hungry at all and he didn't even have to exercise to lose this weight!!! He was not getting short of breath as easily as he had in the past and was able to stop taking his blood pressure medication. He was going to more social functions and getting lots of compliments from friends and coworkers about his weight loss. He was on a high.

Then life started getting back to normal. His friends and coworkers were used to seeing him losing weight, so they were not complimenting him as much, he noticed that he could eat a little more than he could right after surgery, he was feeling some hunger again (which kind of freaked him out), and his weight loss was starting to slow down. Once he came down from his high he realized he still had the same financial, work-related, and social stresses that he'd had before the surgery. But there was one major thing he didn't have: that was the ability to binge eat.

He had understood intellectually that he had eaten as a way of managing uncomfortable feelings, but once his ability to overeat was taken away, he really got to know what it meant to sit with himself and feel. He



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tried to fight it. He knowingly overate on several occasions. While he'd never had a severe dumping episode he drank so much soda one day (six or seven cans of Pepsi), he ended up being out of work for almost a week because he was ill both physically and emotionally. He slipped into a mild depression. Via processing he was able to understand that he was grieving the loss of what was once a very reliable coping mechanism. He felt as if he was losing his best friend.

Fortunately it became too painful on several levels for Bill to continue sabotaging his recovery. He couldn't go on living like this and not suffer significant physical, emotional, and financial losses. He began to realize the importance of “working an aftercare program” and taking responsibility for his recovery. (Something he had been avoiding.) He has since made a commitment to work his program. He signed up for a series of weight loss surgery workshops, journals on a regular basis, participates in the My Self Design program, does daily affirmations, and is gradually increasing his physical activities. He has also asked for support from his house mates and peers.

Bill is saddened by the fact that he may have stretched his pouch with his overeating and is riddled by an underlying fear that he will somehow continue to sabotage

his chances for long-term weight loss. He understands that the language of failure is very comfortable and familiar to him and is more fearful of success at times than failure. But in those moments when he is able to sit with himself and connect with what he calls his higher power, he then realizes his ultimate goal is to be happy, joyous, and free. That means letting go of his attachment to anything that stops him from being present to himself and processing his feelings, no matter what they are. He wants this more than anything and has recently said, “I know without a doubt that I need to be involved with a structured support program to help me in dealing with my addiction. I now understand that recovery is a process; surgery is not a quick fix, and I need to be an active part of the solution, not the problem.” Bill is well on his way to reclaiming his power over food! ■



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