

● food and feelings

by Louisa Latela, MSW, LCSW

1 the Importance of Making the Connection

I had been asked to speak to a Post-Op WLS support group a couple of years ago... around the time that gastric bypass was just starting to become “popular.” As a psychotherapist who has been working with persons struggling with weight issues for more than 17 years, I was astounded when I spoke to this support group and realized that many bariatric patients have never made the connection between food and feelings.

The first woman to speak said she had become obsessed with having to be a size 0. She was in a size two and would not buy any type of clothing that was larger than that and was actively trying to get to that 0. She was exercising compulsively. Another woman reported that she was drinking more and acting out sexually. One participant said she “had it all”: great husband, great kids, a job she loved and all the money she could want, yet she had never been so unhappy. She was starting to eat chocolate again. Yet another member said she was so nervous, she did not know what to do with herself. When she got home at night she would be watching TV and get up and walk to the kitchen, open up the refrigerator door, then close it and go back to the TV. She would do this several times every night. Other people expressed great fears, for example, what life would be like as a thinner person.

I started to explain to them that I believe we are all born these perfect little psychic bundles of love. We are who we are in each moment, expressing our truth with



freedom and innocence. If we're happy we laugh, sad we cry, hungry we eat, full we stop. It doesn't occur to us to not be real about who and what we are and how we feel. Then as we age we start to get sometimes very subtle and sometimes very overt messages that who we are is not ok - that it is not safe to express our truth. This can come from getting messages like “big boys don't cry,” “oh, that doesn't hurt,” “that was a stupid thing to say,” or maybe you heard your parents arguing and asked your mother what was wrong and she said “nothing is wrong everything is just fine,” and you start to think, “It didn't feel fine to me. It felt like there was some anger. Like something between my

parents was really off,” but your mother who to this point you've believed to be the expert about life said everything was ok. Then you start to think, “something must be wrong with the way I think or perceive things.” You learn to not trust your instincts. Then one day someone comes along and asks, “What color is the sky?” and you think, “Well, I think it is blue, but I don't know if what I think is right. The last time I cut my finger, it hurt and I cried. I was told that it didn't hurt that bad, and I shouldn't cry. I don't know. Maybe the sky is purple or green.” And when we are unable to express our truth, it creates a great deal of anxiety. Often, families teach children to manage feelings like anxiety with food. When we are focused on food, we learn that we do not have to be present to the current situation, nor do we feel the pain of not being able to trust and/or express ourselves. Food eventually becomes a reliable coping mechanism, a comfort zone that allows us to ignore and disconnect from what is real.

Weight loss surgery patients who take the time to understand how and why they became morbidly obese and make the connection between food and feelings may make sturdier lifestyle changes that support long term weight loss. In the past 2 months I have had 4 people call my office who were 2-3 years post op. They were all starting to gain their weight back (anywhere from 25-65 pounds) and were desperate to understand why and learn what they could do to change it. None of these people had sought out any psychological counseling either before or after their surgery. They all thought, "It will just work because I won't be hungry and my stomach can't handle enough food to make me get fat again." Unfortunately this was not the case. They had very little insight as to how they were using food to manage the intensity of their emotions.

One way to start to understand the role compulsive eating has played in your life, is to be aware of when your thoughts turn to food when you are not physically hungry, and ask yourself, "What would I be doing right now if I wasn't thinking about food?" It is in these moments that it is very helpful to keep a journal. It doesn't have to be in a fancy book, it can just be on a piece of scrap paper. The purpose here is to start to make you conscious of when you may be eating for reasons other than physical hunger. Before you can change a behavior you must first become aware of it. Write down anything that comes to mind. Try not to filter what you are writing. If you don't know what you would be doing or what you are feeling write about what "not knowing" feels like, and ask yourself "what kind of nurturing do I need right now?"

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foundation upon which a successful recovery program must be built. People who are in the process of losing weight and attempting to change their lifestyle may be hard on themselves. Any small deviation from their meal plan may be looked at as a failure, triggering feelings of anger, depression and shame. They may be trying hard to cope, but the shame that follows this kind of self talk can intensify the feelings of hopelessness and lead one to give up on oneself entirely. It is in these moments that we all need to tell ourselves the same thing we would tell a child or loved one. Would we tell them they are a failure because they did not follow their meal plan? If we wouldn't say it to them, then why would we say it to ourselves? It is in these moments that we must be extra kind and compassionate with ourselves. It is a time when we really need to give ourselves an emotional hug, and think about the idea that we

are doing the thing that we least want to do (that is eat in a way that does not support good health). That we have done this is an indication that this behavior feels safer than sitting with some uncomfortable feelings. Sometimes we all struggle to love ourselves enough to believe that we are worth the effort of hanging in there with ourselves as we attempt to make behavioral changes that will support us living a healthier life.

Know that food is not good or bad, it just manipulates the energy in our bodies. Notice when and what you are eating and ask yourself, "Will this food support good health for me? How will I feel physically about 20 minutes after I am done eating this? How will I feel emotionally?" It has often been said that our lives are a manifestation of our intentions. Think about what that might mean in your life as you observe the way you eat.

Is the way that you are eating and self caretaking an indication that your core intention for your life is something like: "It is my intention to have a healthy, joyful, abundant life" or is it something else? Just notice and think about what you would like the intention for your life to be. That to which we put our attention, expands.

As I mentioned earlier, it is not uncommon for people to express great fear and concern regarding what will life be like as a thin person. How will I handle attention from the opposite sex? What will I do with all the extra time and energy I will have when I am eating for good health and energy? What will I do without the protection of my excess weight? As people travel down the road to recovery from morbid obesity, they are sometimes surprised to find out that they are not so much afraid of failure, but of success. Uncovering feelings of unworthiness, asking, "Who am I to be successful and have a big life?" When actually they need to learn to ask the question, "Who am I not to be? What gives me the right to not have a fabulous life?" It is not uncommon for people to use excess weight as a way of putting distance between themselves and others. When this is the case, one must learn to be assertive and set appropriate boundaries, and at the same time, risk being vulnerable and experience emotional intimacy. It is important to acknowledge and process any of these feelings that might surface, because if ignored, they could trigger intense feelings of depression, a common comorbidity for bariatric patients, and fear which can sabotage your success. I believe that depression is an energy that is "depressed," that it is a sign that there is something in one's psyche or soul that wants to be expressed but has not had such an opportunity. (This is in no way meant to say that people who suffer from clinical depression need not consult with a physician and take meds as directed). When this oft times creative urge or passion tries to surface and it gets stuffed back down, a person often experiences this phenomenon as depression. As a bariatric patient one must start to explore what it is that excites

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them, what is it that sparks their interest, what triggers feelings of passion and excitement? Allow yourself to follow your passions. Allow yourself to play. Playing is a vitally important "nutrient" for the well being of our mind, body and spirit. It truly nurtures one's soul.

It is important to understand that feelings are just energy in your body. They, like food, are not good or bad or right or wrong. You do not have to react to your feelings. You can breathe into them and just notice them. Eventually you will begin to understand how to change your feelings as you become aware of your core beliefs and self talk. We are taught in this society that we always have to "feel good" and if we begin to feel angry, sad, anxious, etc., we must do something to stop the feeling; but, what is truly healing is to embrace the feeling, and just sit with it. It will eventually soften, and then you can move through it. When you start to truly "listen to yourself," you will know what actions you must take in order to live a life that supports your highest good.

I am writing this article because I feel so passionately about the need to get this information out to the weight loss surgery population to help them understand that surgery is only the first step. Please, if you have had, or are considering having this surgery, be sure to set yourself up with a good aftercare plan that includes individual psychological and nutritional counseling/support, realistic exercise instruction, a primary care physician familiar with weight loss surgery and group support. Surgery is not a magic cure. There is both emotional and physical work to be done in order to live a life free from compulsive eating. **But IT CAN BE DONE!!** ■



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