

FOOD ADDICTION

by Linda Fiverson

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN L.I. HERALD COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER JUNE, 2003
(UPDATED JUNE, 2008)

WHAT IS FOOD ADDICTION?

Basically, food addiction is a disease (Yes, it's much more than a compulsive behavior disorder) that is characterized by the preoccupation with food, the availability of food and the anticipation of pleasure that ingesting the food will give us. Food addiction can be compared to drug and alcohol addiction. To the food addict, refined sugar, flour and fats become what a drink is to the alcoholic.

Once we eat these foods, we set the phenomenon of "craving" into motion. Like any addiction, once we attempt to cut down on these trigger foods, our bodies crave them on a greater scale.

Have you ever found yourself saying, "My eating is out of control." Have you ever thought, "Why can't I stop eating once I start? I can't control my cravings! I eat too much!" Then, after you have finished the box of cookies you didn't really want, or the pint of ice cream that ultimately didn't give you the satisfaction you craved, you feel guilty, unhappy, unworthy, depressed and terribly lonely, as though you're the only person on the planet that can't control those self-sacrificing binges. Let me tell you something -- you're not alone!

UNDERSTANDING IS THE FIRST STEP

There really is such a thing as being addicted to food. We all make jokes, but in fact it is not a joking matter. Some of us are as addicted to food as the drug abuser is addicted to speed or heroin.

Food addicts have a disorder that is essentially characterized by a preoccupation with food. They spend an inordinate amount of time anticipating the pleasure they will derive from food and how to acquire it. Food addiction is the repetitive consumption of food against a person's better judgment which results in loss of control and preoccupation with body weight and image.

BINGE EATING

Compulsive overeaters use food inappropriately and ultimately become addicted to it. Most overeaters, according to doctors, are 60% overweight. Binge eaters are unable to control their food intake and are continually dieting. While intermittent and repetitive dieting give the binge eater some sense of control over their situation, the relief is temporary and soon the weight is gained back and unfortunately, with a few extra pounds to boot. These frequent fluctuations in weight can also result in medical problems such as high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol, arteriosclerosis and Type 2 diabetes. The extra weight also places a burden on the bones and joints.

READING THE SIGNS AND ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Some of the characteristics that the food addict may display are as follows:

- **Obsession:** Food addicts obsess over food! The only way to assuage this obsession is to eat the food they are obsessing about. This is a vicious cycle that will never be broken unless professional intervention is sought.
- **Compulsion:** Once food addicts start down this path and get the little bit of pleasure and comfort from the food that is craved, they can't stop!

Here are some questions to ask yourself regarding your eating habits:

1. *Are you always thinking about food? Especially if it's in your presence?*
2. *Do you sometimes eat compulsively, without thinking and often, not enjoy the foods?*
3. *Is eating a comfort behavior for you?*
4. *Do you eat beyond the point that you are satisfied and sometimes feel like you are going to explode?*
5. *Do you sneak-eat and then become consumed with more guilt?*
6. *Does your dieting set up a binge behavior?*
7. *Have you been told that you have a food problem?*
8. *Did you rapidly gain weight as soon as you got off your diet?*
9. *Do you weigh yourself more than once a day?*
10. *Once you start eating, do you find that you can't skip?*
11. *Do you prefer to eat alone?*
12. *Do you prefer to have companions that eat the same way that you do so that you don't feel so ashamed and guilty? ("Partners in crime", so to speak)*

There are many more questions I could ask. However, if you relate to any of the ones above you are more than likely struggling with eating compulsively.

IT'S ALL IN THE BRAIN

Have you ever walked through the mall and smelled the amazing aromas coming from the food court? It's not your stomach that makes you head up the escalator to that burger haven, it's your brain. It releases chemicals in your body that turn you into a food zombie!

Addictive eating is a symptom of a biochemical imbalance rather than a psychological issue although the after effects of a binge session can be very emotional. We end up feeling so badly about our lack of control that we experience negative feelings about ourselves on the whole. This generally leads to more self-inflicted food-based therapy because we think it will make us feel better. The vicious cycle continues to spin!

BACK TO THE CULPRIT - REFINED SUGAR

One of the major problems with binge eating is that we almost always eat the wrong foods. Can any of us remember a time we were going through an emotional crisis and ran to the kitchen to binge on vegetables or fruit? Probably not!

The biochemical problem with binge eating gets exacerbated when we eat refined sugars and white flour. When we eat foods that contain these ingredients, the brain rapidly produces insulin which causes its neurotransmitter, serotonin, to immediately elevate. Serotonin is the endorphin that tells us when we feel good, unstressed, relaxed, etc. Sadly, it doesn't also tell us that while we are feeling so good we are doing our body serious harm.

ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING

To be successful, we have to "accept" that we truly can, at some point, control how we eat. This doesn't have to be a lifelong burden. It is an addiction we have to wheat and sweet. Once we harness our inner strength and overcome the cravings for these things we can eat with control. As long as we stay away from the trigger foods that alter our brain chemistry we will stay in control!

Linda Fiveson is a Nutritionist in Syosset, N.Y. In addition to counseling she sells her own line of foods which are all free of flour, gluten, sugar and preservatives. For more information call (516) 496-2300 or visit her website at www.lindafiveson.com