

CAN YOU BE ADDICTED TO FOOD?

For some of us it's chips. For others it's ice cream. For many of us it's chocolate! Or the most common culprit is SUGAR!

Food addiction theory is controversial and as of yet the research behind it is problematic and has been blown way out of proportion by the media.

Food is supposed to be rewarding

I've talked about this before (see January Newsletter)

We have strong biological and psychological mechanisms that kick in to make food more rewarding. Those mechanisms are there for a reason.

Food is supposed to be rewarding. It's what helps us survive. If food were not rewarding, we would stop eating.

*Next month's
newsletter*

**Emotional
Eating**



Dopamine feels good

Fasting triggers the brain to increase dopamine which is the feel good hormone.

A 2013 brain imaging study of dieting teens showed how caloric deprivation actually changed certain areas in the brain so that food, particularly palatable high calorie foods, became more rewarding (Stice et al., 2013)

So, if you are in a situation of food restriction (like when you're dieting or "being careful"), food becomes even more rewarding. And you tend to overeat. And you often tend to overeat on more palatable foods (salt, fat, sugar) which have more potential to alter behavior and activate the part of the brain involved with food reward.

Food restriction can lead to overeating on palatable foods (salt, fat, sugar)

Rats with sugar addiction

A study out of Princeton University showed how when rats were daily food deprived for 12 hours, and then fed sugar intermittently, they became addicted to sugar (Avena et al., 2008)

This group of rats was compared to various control groups of rats who were also fed sugar but did not develop this sugar addiction.

What was the difference between the sugar addicted rats and the control groups?

The "sugar addicted" rats had been starved daily for 12 hours whereas the rats in the control groups had ready access to food.

So it's not surprising that the rats that were deprived couldn't stop eating sugar!

Yale Food Addiction Scale

Much of the research makes the assumption that food addiction is an accepted neurobiological disorder, similar to substance use disorders (like cocaine)

The Yale Food Addiction Scale came out of a Yale University study in 2009 (Gearhardt et al., 2009).

This scale is now being used in many studies around the world to study food addiction.

But let's look at some of the questions on the questionnaire:

- I find myself consuming certain foods even though I am no longer hungry
 - I worry about cutting down on certain foods
 - I have spent time dealing with negative feelings from overeating certain foods, instead of spending time in important activities such as with family, friends, work or recreation
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These questions were not measuring food addiction but the consequences of chronic dieting and food restriction (rebound eating)

Further problems were identified with this scale. For more on this you can check out Long et al., 2015 under references.

When you start looking at human studies, addiction theory would predict that if you started giving binge eaters their "trigger" foods you would expect that they would not be able to stop eating them. But the 5 human studies to date, show this doesn't happen. It's actually the opposite.

When subjects in human addiction studies are given access to their “trigger foods” as part of their treatment plan, they no longer meet the criteria for binge eating disorder.

If they were actually addicted to the food, you would not be seeing this.

You can check out one of these studies in the reference section (Kristeller and Wolever, 2011).

Belief in food addiction creates fear and worry

There is a risk that the term food addiction implies that certain foods are toxic and therefore should be avoided. It creates unnecessary fear and worry and mistrust of your innate biological cues.

And unlike drugs or gambling, eating is essential for survival and the diet contains high proportions of these “addictive agents” (sugar, fat, salt).

You can never totally eliminate sugars, fats or salt.

The idea you can be addicted to food can also start a vicious cycle:

- You believe you can’t have a food (because you’re addicted)
- so, you don’t allow yourself to have it
- so, the cravings start to build
- then something happens (an event or an emotion)
- And then you break down and have that food and you end up overeating on it because you think you cannot have it.
- And then you feel awful for giving in to the forbidden food
- So you binge on it some more

Feeling like you are addicted to food can make you feel helpless and out of control. The feelings and sensations you are experiencing are very real. But there is a way to come to peace with these “addictive” foods.

Binge Eating Disorder (BED)

Before you consider making peace with food, you need to ensure that what you are dealing with is NOT a binge eating disorder (BED).

The diagnostic criteria for BED includes feelings of being out of control with food which may feel like an addiction. BED is a serious eating disorder and needs specialized treatment,

For information or to seek help, check out these resources:

anebquebec

(Anorexie et boulimie Quebec):

<https://anebquebec.com/en/troubles-alimentaires/lhyperphagie-boulimique>

Nedic

(National Eating Disorder Information Centre):

[http://nedic.ca/clinical-definitions#Binge-Eating%20Disorder%20\(BED\)](http://nedic.ca/clinical-definitions#Binge-Eating%20Disorder%20(BED))

How to start making peace with "addictive" foods

Coming to terms with "addictive" foods is possible. But sometimes you need some help. Because there are many possible reasons that this may be happening.

With the intuitive eating approach, you start introducing these "forbidden" foods as part of the process. When you start to do this, these foods start to lose their power and potency. However, if other underlying issues are not worked out first, this re-introduction process might back-fire.

Consider meeting with a Certified Intuitive Eating Counsellor who can take you through this process.

References: 1. Avena, N.M., Rada, P. and Hoebel, B.G. 2008. Evidence of sugar addiction: Behavioural and neurochemical effects of intermittent, excessive sugar intake. *J.neubiorev.* 32: 20-39. --- 2. Gearhardt, AN, Corbin, WR and Brownell, KD. 2009. Preliminary validation of the Yale Food Addiction Scale. *Appetite.* 52: 430-436. --- 3. Kristellar, JL and Wolever, RQ. 2010. Mindfulness-based eating awareness training for treating binge eating disorder: The conceptual foundation. *J.Eat.Disord.* 19(1): 49-61.--- 4. Long, CG, Blundell, JE and Finlayson, G. 2015. A systematic review of the application and correlates of YFAS-Diagnosed 'Food Addiction' in Humans: Are eating-related 'addictions' a cause for concern or empty concepts? *Obes Facts.* 8: 386-401. --- 5. Stice, E., Burger, K. and Yokum, S. 2013. Caloric deprivation increases responsivity of attention and reward brain regions to intake, anticipated intake, and images of palatable foods. *NeuroImage.* 67: 322-330.

To learn more about intuitive eating, register for my 8-week webinar “An Introduction to Intuitive Eating” starting May 21st. Register on the events section of my facebook page and/or contact me for further information!

See next month’s newsletter "Emotional Eating"
You can also check out my posts on facebook
or contact me and schedule your free 15 minute discovery call!

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