CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Developing Healthy Eating Habits

AGENDA

- Welcome and reflections on previous session
- Homework discussion
- Topic: Developing Healthy Eating Habits
    - Introduction
    - The Many Meanings of Food and Eating
    - Eating Problems in People With a Complex Dissociative Disorder
    - Tips for Resolving Inner Conflicts About Healthy Eating
- Homework
    - Reread the chapter.
    - Complete Homework Sheet 13.1, Record of Your Eating Patterns.
    - Complete Homework Sheet 13.2, A Plan for Improving an Eating Problem.

Introduction

The focus of this chapter is to help you resolve problems with eating related to traumatization and dissociation. Eating is an integral part of healthy living and an often overlooked partner in healing from trauma. Sensible and healthy eating nourishes and helps heal your body, which is under chronic stress when you have a dissociative disorder. When your body feels better, you feel better in general. But if you grew up in a home in which eating was associated with tension and stress at mealtimes, or food was not healthy or readily available, or was used as excessive reward or punishment, various aspects of eating may be difficult for you. We

begin with an understanding of the many meanings of food and eating, and then discuss ways in which you might deal with any eating problems that may be related to your dissociative disorder.

The Many Meanings of Food and Eating

Food and eating are often associated with positive thoughts and feelings for most people. Being fed as an infant is one of the very first ways we experience a relationship. Eating is a way we care for ourselves and receive care from others. Thus, it is connected with giving and receiving, with nurturing and care, that is, with people and relationships. At social gatherings, food is often central. We experience food in many ways: through sight, smell, taste, touch, and even sound (the sizzle and pop of some dishes), so that awareness of foods can affect all of our senses. Certain foods also evoke emotions because they have become associated with particular memories.

Eating is also a necessity, providing us with the energy and nutrients we need for living. Poor eating habits can cause both physical and psychological symptoms. Eating too little can lead to becoming seriously underweight, vitamin and mineral deficiencies, brittle bones, dental problems, anemia, poor memory, and difficulties in thinking clearly and rationally. Overeating can result in obesity, an increased risk of heart disease, diabetes, asthma, joint and bone problems, and even of certain types of cancer. In addition to physical symptoms, eating problems can give rise to numerous psychological symptoms, such as shame and self-loathing, depression and anxiety, a disturbed body image, and a tendency to isolate from others.

Attention to and knowledge about healthy eating habits differ from person to person, family to family, and culture to culture. If you need basic nutritional guidance, cooking skills, help with efficient food shopping, or tips for healthy meal planning, there are many Web sites and books readily available on those subjects. If you need more personalized guidance, we suggest that you consult a nutritionist, whom your therapist or primary care physician can help you locate.

Eating Problems in People With a Complex

Dissociative Disorder

A majority of people with dissociative disorders have at least some difficulties with eating (for example, Boon & Draijer, 1993; Goodwin & Attias, 1993; Vanderlinden & Vandereycken, 1997). Different parts of yourself may have different eating preferences or problems, resulting in unstable or chaotic eating patterns. Some parts of you may have reasons to avoid food as much as possible, while others may have a tendency to overeat or binge.

If you are not yet very aware of dissociative parts of yourself, it may be difficult for you to understand certain eating problems that occur due to the activity of these parts. For example, perhaps you find evidence that you have been eating during the night without awareness, or find food in the kitchen that you do not like but must have bought, or feel intense urges to binge or purge, or limit your food unreasonably. You may have food preferences or craving that suddenly begin and end without warning. It may be uncomfortable or perhaps even frightening to realize that other parts of you have actually bought, prepared, or eaten food outside of your awareness. But as you become more comfortable with parts of yourself, you will feel less afraid and more able to negotiate and coordinate the essential activity of eating.

Following is a list of eating problems that are often experienced by people who have a dissociative disorder. Check or circle the ones that may apply to you or to other parts of yourself.

- Bingeing (eating excessive amounts of food in one sitting, beyond what is healthy, to the point of feeling bloated and sick)
- Purging (forced vomiting, use of diuretics or laxatives to get rid of food and decrease weight)
- Food restriction (eating too little or a very limited variety of food compared to what the average person consumes)
- Being triggered by particular foods or by eating in general, and associating food with negative feelings and beliefs, or memories
- Lack of knowledge about basic nutrition
- Difficulties shopping for food
- Difficulties making food choices
- Difficulties with food preparation (for example, it feels too

complicated or overwhelming to make a meal)
- Sudden loss of knowledge about how to prepare food or sudden lack of familiarity about how to use kitchen appliances
- Problems establishing healthy and regular eating routines
- Forgetting to eat due to problems with time management and/or inattention
- Inability to feel hunger or thirst due to physical numbness and avoidance of physical sensations
- Desire to maintain a body shape that is not within a healthy range because it feels protective (for example, being overweight helps you feel insulated; being underweight helps you feel less like an object of desire, or it gives you the certainty that you cannot get pregnant)
- Conflicts among parts of yourself about whether, what, and when to eat
- Food and eating are associated with shame and self-loathing
- Difficulty being around others when eating
- "Emotional" eating, that is, using food to cope with emotions
- Food restriction or withholding as punishment

Tips for Resolving Inner Conflicts About Healthy Eating

- Learn to recognize and understand your difficulties with food and eating. Reflect on any inner conflicts about aspects of eating (for example, regarding shopping, staying within budget, preparation, types of food). Make a short list of any problems and check the ones with which you want to begin. Remember to begin with easier problems before you work on more complex ones.
- Recognize that some parts of yourself may be stuck in trauma-time and may have found solutions in the past to regulate intense emotions through their eating habits (under- or overeating), and other parts may be triggered by certain foods or mealtimes. Begin by acknowledging the purpose and intention of these eating problems, rather than blaming parts of yourself.
- Eating problems, like many other problems, can take time to

resolve. Be patient and empathic with all parts of yourself. Allow yourself to be content with taking small steps at a time.

- Begin by choosing one small problem area about food and eating, for instance, shopping, or cooking, or irregular meal times. These are tasks that are usually accomplished by you or other parts that have a function in daily life. Make a list of small and very specific steps you need to put into action. Spend time communicating internally to get a sense of how various parts of yourself should be involved with a plan.
- If some part of you is triggered by food to the degree that it makes you unable to eat, help this part of yourself be in an inner safe place during food preparation and mealtimes as a temporary containment. Later, when you are ready, you can help this part overcome what is triggering.
- You might spend a little time considering what foods you appreciate and enjoy, and whether there are different preferences among parts of yourself. If helpful, use a diary or your computer to create a file where all parts may list their food preferences. You can learn to take into account wishes of other parts in a reasonable way, instead of ignoring or criticizing them.
- Notice what happens when you think about your eating problem, for example, shopping or eating irregularly. Of what beliefs are you aware? What emotions and sensations? Are you aware of any parts of yourself that might have a different experience with eating than you do? Be compassionate with yourself as you become more aware.
- Make every effort to eat at least three times a day in order to get into a healthy routine. Reach an inner agreement with other parts to do so. Make a plan to remind yourself to eat by using a timer or alarm, if you need it. Set some dates to go out with friends to eat. Put a list of meals on the refrigerator and cross them off when you have eaten.
- If you have a daily inner struggle about cooking, or if you have little time for cooking due to work or other obligations, make large portions of food at a time, divide them into individual servings, and freeze them or store them in the refrigerator, so that you will have something healthy to pull out and eat quickly when you do not feel like cooking or do

not have time.

- If particular parts of you have strong food preferences or aversions, try to allow some flexibility in responding to them. Perhaps you can temporarily avoid a food if it is triggering to a part of you. Or you might provide a food preference in moderation for a part of you.
- It is important to set healthy limits on the food that various parts want to eat. It will not help you to give in to a part that only wants to eat ice cream or cookies, for example. After all, your job is to begin to provide yourself (including all parts) with a healthy lifestyle.
- Eating patterns often have an underlying emotional goal: You may eat when you are tired, bored, angry, depressed, and so forth. When you feel hungry, yet do not need to eat, notice what emotions or thoughts you are having. Are there any feelings or situations that you might want to avoid by eating? Also pay attention to whether a part of you needs something, such as comfort or attention from you.
- When you have eaten well, and some part of you still feels the need to eat, determine whether this part is oriented to the present. If not, try to orient this part to the present so that you can share your physical sensations of being satiated. You may also imagine an inner safe space where food is plentiful for parts of you that may feel chronically deprived.
- Binge eating is usually a way of regulating unbearable feelings. If you suffer from (nocturnal) attacks of binge eating (with amnesia), inner communication and cooperation with parts can help stop this behavior. For example, perhaps parts will agree that nighttime is only for sleeping (see chapter 9 on sleep), and not for eating. A safe inner place with plentiful food may be sufficient to stop parts of you from actually eating during the night. With the help of your therapist you can begin to understand more about the parts of yourself that engage in such behaviors and then try to help them make positive changes, which may include finding suitable alternatives that meet their needs adequately.
- Try to make more social contacts that involve eating. If you have problems with regular meals, make an agreement with friends or colleagues that each person will cook a large meal to share with everyone each week (for instance, a big pot of

soup, stew, pasta, chili, etc.), so you do not have to cook as often. This activity and sharing also helps you become more accustomed to socializing while eating.

- If you or parts of you find it hard to eat, pair your eating with something enjoyable about which all parts can agree, for instance, taking a picnic to eat on a pleasant hike; sitting outdoors and enjoying the breeze while you eat; arranging your food nicely on the plate and adding a special garnish; setting the table nicely and adding flowers, candles, and music; and so forth.
- If there is a day that you really cannot eat, use liquid nutritional supplements.
- If you have serious eating problems, be honest with your doctor, dietician, and therapist and let them help you make a stepwise plan that works for you.

Homework Sheet 13.1
Record of Your Eating Patterns

1. List healthy eating habits you and parts of yourself already employ and wish to continue.

2. In the chart below, list your successes and challenges in eating. Successes might include eating at a regular time, eating healthy food, preparing a meal. Challenges might include forgetting to eat, refusing to eat, bingeing, eating junk food, or difficulty in shopping or preparing a meal. Use this chart to keep track of your eating.

	Breakfast	Lunch	Supper	Snacks	Nights
Monday					
Tuesday					
Wednesday					
Thursday					
Friday					
Saturday					
Sunday					

Homework Sheet 13.2
A Plan for Improving an Eating Problem

Based on the example below, list one eating problem, your objectives for what you want to change, any inner conflicts among parts of yourself, and specific steps to help yourself. Objectives should always be measurable, defined, specific, and include simple steps.

Example

Eating Problem	***Describe Your Problem***
Eating unhealthy food	Eat a lot of junk and fast food; not enough vegetables; too many sodas; hate to cook
Eating at irregular times	Forget to eat; eat on the run; snack all day; find evidence that I am eating during the night

My objectives (what I want to do differently):
Eat a healthy meal (including fresh fruits and vegetables or salad) at least once a day at a regular time: lunch (between noon–1 p.m.) or dinner (between 6:30 p.m.–7:30 p.m.)

Inner conflicts or concerns about changing my behavior:

1. Parts of me like junk food, and it's a comfort for them and me.
   - Possible solution: Buy one type of junk food and have it, but in limited quantities; that is, eat one serving portion. Chew your food slowly and mindfully, and savor it; this will make you feel more full and satisfied. Be mindful that you have given yourself a treat.
2. I don't like change and I am afraid of additional inner struggles.
   - Possible solution: I will try to communicate (maybe with help of my therapist) with parts of myself so I can understand more about the fear of change. I will find and discuss with all parts of myself. I will start small, changing one thing at a time. I will introduce one healthy food at a time, and I will begin with one regular meal that includes some healthy food.

Steps to achieve my objectives:

1. Take time for inner communication, cooperation, negotiation, and joint decision making about each step of my plan.
2. Gain a better understanding of what foods are and are not healthy.
3. Set specific times to eat each day and set an alarm as a reminder.
4. Choose a couple of healthy and easy recipes or find places where I can buy prepared healthy food that is within my budget.
5. Make a list before going to the grocery store; take into account different preferences of all parts of myself.
6. Ask a friend to shop with me, so I will stick to my list.
7. Go to grocery store only once a week.

Eating problem (describe your problem in detail):

My objectives (what I want to do differently; be specific):

Inner conflicts or concerns about changing my behavior:

Steps to achieve my objectives (begin with small, manageable changes; be specific).