

Head Hunger: What Our Patients Want Us to Know

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Financial Relationship Disclosure

- Director, Virginia Health Counseling
- In the past 24 months, I have had no financial relationships with ineligible companies.
- I have no relevant relationship(s) to disclose.
- I have no actual or potential conflict of interest in relation to this presentation.

What Is Head Hunger?

Any urge to eat that does not stem from actual, physical, stomach hunger.

(O'Brien, 2023)

What do you wish someone had told you before surgery?
What do you know now that you wish you knew before surgery?

"I didn't understand how much I was relying on food to get me through the day, emotionally speaking, until I couldn't have it. It was a buoy that lifted me up whenever I needed it. Now I'm out here without a lifebuoy."

Anonymous 1 _____

"There is a huge monster yelling right in my face all the time. The only time he stops yelling is when I'm full." Anonymous 2

"I had no idea how much my mind factored into what I eat. I thought I just liked food. I thought I just liked to eat. I underestimated how strongly my mind factors into my ability to make decisions about eating." Anonymous 3



Professional Recommendations

- Eat protein
- Stay hydrated
- Eat small meals slowly
- Eat proteins first
- Have a set eating schedule
- Drink enough water
- Ride the wave of head hunger
- Brush your teeth
- Make a phone call
- Reverse log in your food
- Pinch yourself
- Go for a walk
- Deep breathing
- Meditation
- Identify your emotions

(Turnquest, Epstein, Piper, 2023)



Head Hunger on a Spectrum

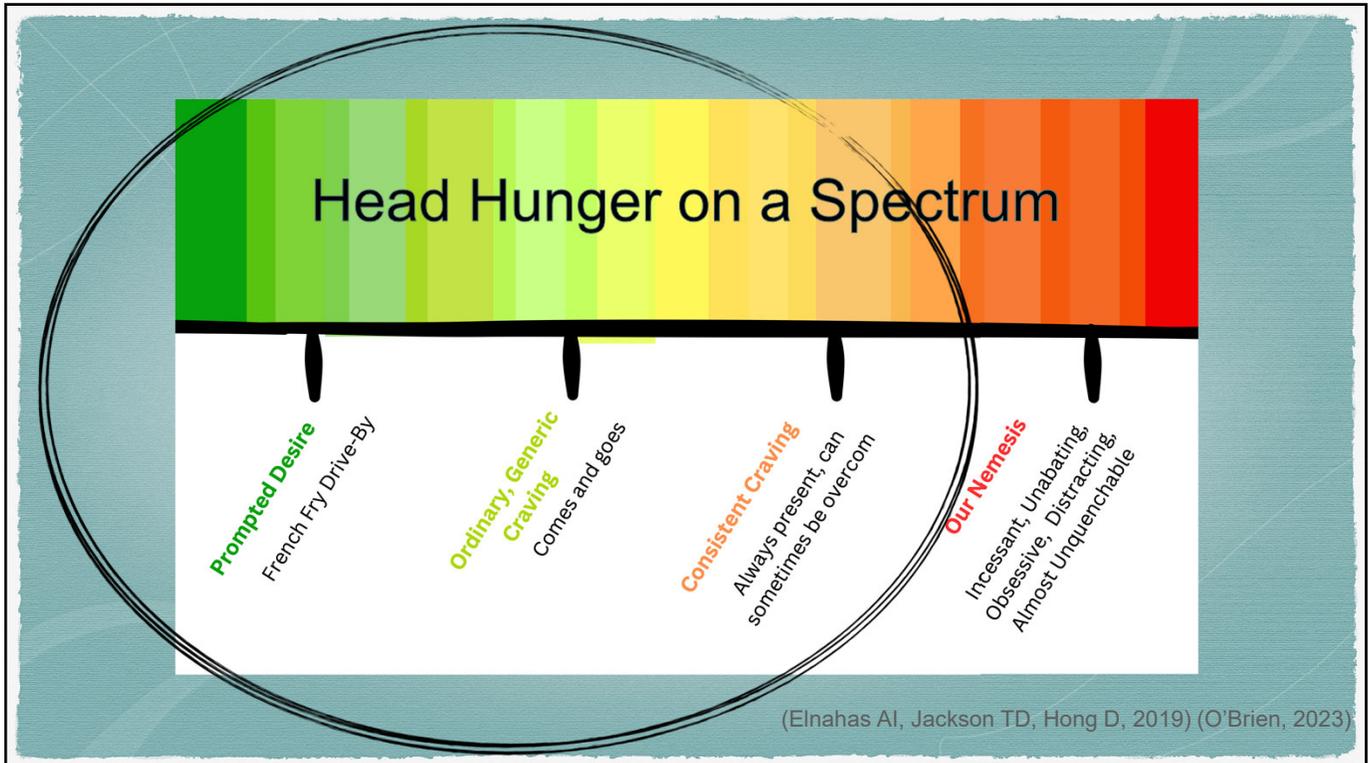
Prompted Desire
French Fry Drive-By

Ordinary, Generic Craving
Comes and goes

Consistent Craving
Always present, can sometimes be overcome

Our Nemesis
Incessant, Unabating, Obsessive, Distracting, Almost Unquenchable

(Elnahas AI, Jackson TD, Hong D, 2019) (O'Brien, 2023)



Red Zone Head Hunger is Not:

- Normal Appetite
- Something than can be “surfed”
- Affected by nutritional or behavioral interventions

So, what *is* it?

(Singh, 2014)

Red Zone Hunger Factor

Psychological
Post-Surgery Stressors
Motivation/Energy/Balance
Anxiety
Mood Disorders
Trauma

(Lim, Blackburn, et al., 2009) (Heinberg, 2017)

Psychological ✓
Post-Surgery Stressors
Motivation/Energy
Trauma

Common Post-Surgery Stressors

- Grieving the loss of food
- Regrets about having surgery
- Relationship changes
- Disappointment in amount or speed of weight loss
- Fear of weight regain



Emotion
Eating

(Heinberg, 2017)



Psychological
Post-Surgery Stressors
Motivation/Energy
Trauma

The Role of Motivation

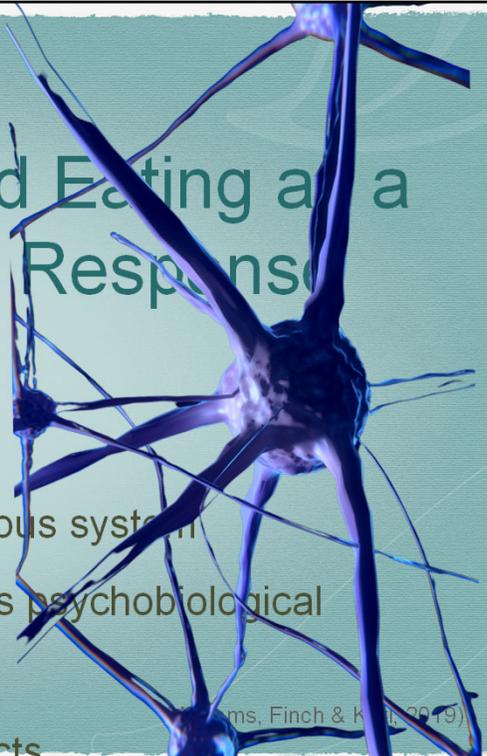
Physical activity
Food choices
Sleep hygiene

“Why do I do that?”

“Why don't do I that?”

“I know what to do. But I just don't do it.”

(Dakanalis, et al., 2023)

Psychological
Post-Surgery Stressors
Motivation/Energy
Trauma

Disordered Eating as a Trauma Response

Trauma can:

- Disrupt the functioning of the nervous system
- Lead to dysregulation of the body's psychobiological systems
- Interfere with basic self-care instincts

(ms. Finch & K., 2019)

Interference with Basic Self-Care Instincts

On the most basic levels such as:

- What should I eat?
- Should I exercise?
- What time should I go to bed?
- How do I take care of myself?

Williams, Finch & K... 2019

The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study
— the largest, most important public health
study you never heard of — began in an
obesity clinic.

READ THIS

Aces Too High
Jane Ellen Steves
10/3/2012

(Steves, 2012)

READ THIS

The ACE Study findings:

- A direct link between childhood trauma and adult onset of chronic disease, obesity, mental illness, justice system involvement, absenteeism
- About two-thirds of participants had experienced one or more different *types* of adverse childhood experiences
- More adverse childhood experiences resulted in a higher risk of medical, mental and social problems as an adult

(Steves, 2020)

Emotional/Psychological Abuse and Neglect

Emotional invalidation is a major factor in the development of eating psychopathology.

Disordered eating can become a mechanism for maintaining control when a person feels like they have no agency and serve as a way to avoid disconnect from emotional trauma.

(Williams & Finch, 2019)

How Do We Address Red Zone Head Hunger?

- Utilize an integrative health approach to routinely conduct trauma-specific screening.
- Normalize follow-up mental health support.
- When indicated, incorporate ongoing therapy with a trauma-informed mental health clinician as part of the treatment plan.

(Williamson, Thompson, Anda, Dietz, Felitti, 2002)

Case by Case

Not all patients with Head Hunger have a trauma
background.

Avoid stereotyping and bias.

It may benefit our patients if we become more curious,
diligent, and skilled in recognizing trauma as a factor.

(Linn, Blackburn, Jones, 2019) (Schafer, 2014)

Take Aways: Head Hunger as On a Spectrum

- **INDIVIDUALLY:** An individual may experience all levels of intensity on the spectrum.
- **Globally:** What one person experiences as Head Hunger may be completely unlike what another person experiences.

(NIMH, 2023)

The Trauma Take Away

- If a patient's eating habits have roots in trauma, it is not enough to address the eating behaviors.
- To address the behavior, the trauma must be addressed as well.
- If the trauma is not addressed, nutritional and physical activity interventions are less likely to be effective. (Waller, Glenn, Corstorphine, & Victoria. 2007)

Our patients should not have to face
the Head Hunger monster alone.



Working with dedicated,
multidisciplinary
treatment teams can
improve on long-term
results.

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