



You Don't Lose Weight on a Diet of Emotional Deprivation

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You have finite energy to split across your life, and if you spend it planning meals, cooking, and eating (and perhaps recovering from episodes of over indulgence), you may have little left for other things like your emotional life. Over-dependence on nurturing from food can leave unsatisfied emotional hunger—this is the anatomy of disordered eating, in which the satisfactions of our emotional life that require patience, frustration, tolerance, self discipline, and anxiety management are forsaken for the easy fix of food. But by taking the easy way out, you train your mind to confuse emotional hunger for physical hunger, leading to the atrophy of our "emotional muscles." Too much easy way out can lead to the loss of willingness and ability to learn new and more adaptive behaviors. Of course, this taking the easy route of food can become a negative spiral of emotional dysregulation leading to chronic unhappiness, leading to more eating. Eating may become the equivalent of an alcoholic drinking to cure a hangover.

Psychotherapy can be a powerful antidote to abusive eating. A competent therapist reads between the patient's verbal lines to disentangle physical hunger from myriad forms of emotional hunger. What is "hunger" and what is a for admiration, validation, comfort, and encouragement? Through psychotherapy, patients can learn to accept, normalize and develop strategies for meeting needs previously shrouded in darkness that fueled unending hunger for food. A caring therapist satisfies emotional hunger and affirms the patient as a deserving recipient. These transactions reduce the need to satisfy these emotional hungers through food, outside the office. For example, I worked with a young man I'll call Jim, who obsessed about food and controlling his "neediness" for food. He presented with social anxieties, fearful of losing control of desperate urges to merge with and be cared for by others. Jim's fears of being rejected as too needy and too immature to meet a woman's needs left him painfully self-conscious. These desires were also mingled with fears that he would lose himself in a hypothetical relationship and be exploited and hurt. To control his anxiety over even a hypothetical relationship, this lonely young man attended mixers after work on an empty stomach. He rationalized not eating to save money and then instead of engaging, often withdrew into a preoccupation with the irritability, impatience, and fatigue borne of hunger. Fantasies of returning to his empty apartment where he could relax and cook his favorite meal won out over

starting a conversation with anyone. Predictably, Jim would leave these functions alone after 30 minutes or so. He literally fed any pangs of regret with the meal he imagined. Psychotherapy changed his life by changing his relationship to eating. Jim used to live to eat, and now he eats to live well. The difference can be as simple and as madenningly difficult as becoming aware of how your emotional hunger impacts your physical hunger.