

LET'S TALK FAT!

Part Two (LOVE AND OVEREATING)

Compulsive eating is a common reaction to heartbreak and other stressful situations. Why do so many people turn to food as a source of solace when love goes astray?... and why is eating such an effective way of burying our woes?

For one thing, eating is an enjoyable experience that brings us immediate gratification. And when times are rough, we often reach for the most accessible pleasure available. But the act of eating offers us much more than momentary happiness. There is, in fact, a deep-rooted connection between food and love.

To begin with, food, love, and security are all essential to our physical and psychological well-being. Food is closely linked to our earliest experiences of giving and getting love. For an infant, feeding time means being held, doted on, nurtured - in other words, loved. This connection between love and food is further reinforced during childhood and appears in many of our social interactions throughout our lives. The birthday and wedding cakes, the valentine candies, the favorite dessert prepared for a special occasion - these are all symbols of love and sharing in our society. Furthermore, accepting these gifts is a way of showing our love and appreciation toward the giver. Love is our psychological food and eating is the physical equivalent of receiving love.

Some people indulge in compulsive eating because they view weight gain as a means of avoiding the risk of future love entanglements and failures. Some people try to hide out in their fat. They feel that fat is a protection against being loved, being sexual. Thus, fat becomes their physical armor against the world. Becoming physically larger also makes some people feel more secure because they are literally not as easy to push around.

Another role that eating sometimes plays is as a subconscious method of inflicting punishment on ourselves. Many people interpret their self worth and success in life according to their ability to obtain and retain love. When a love relationship ends, these people view it as a personal failure. Overeating is therefore a type of punishment by which they say to themselves, "I have failed at love, I have caused myself pain, and I'm going to fix it so that no one can hurt me again."

Eating is so closely related to feelings of love and being loved that many people also overeat when they are in love. People gain weight after they marry because marriage creates a false promise of eternal love. People start feeling so secure about their partner that they stop worrying about staying attractive. Another reason why some individuals overeat and gain weight is because they need to feel loved despite their overweight - to have their mate prove that love is more than skin deep. Another common reason for weight gain can be that staying thin was part of the "bait" in attracting a mate, rather than a genuine commitment to good health. Thus, when the need is gone, so is the motivation. The last reason some people gain weight after falling in love is based on deep psychological causes. Some people feel that they don't really deserve to be happy, that they must counterbalance their joy with a problem or loss. The weight gain may cause

the relationship to end or bring other kinds of problems to their lives, which relieves their feelings of guilt over their "undeserved" happiness.

The temptation to indulge in overeating during times of unhappiness or stress - even "good stress" - is great because of food's close ties with security and love. Easing your anxiety with another piece of pie, however, will only compound your problems. In contrast, understanding the reasons behind this urge will help you to control your behavior, boost your self-esteem, and find alternative sources of pleasure besides eating. As a result, you'll not only improve your body, but also enhance your experiences in satisfying this very vital need called LOVE.

Consider contacting a psychologist or professional coach to assist you in breaking free from the cyclical nature of overeating.

Tuck T. Saul, Ph.D.

Psychologist and Strategic Life Coach