

The Pain of Compulsive Overeating: Is this you?

by Tory Butterworth, PhD

If you are a compulsive eater, I have news for you. You can start to **STOP Eating Your Feelings**.

If you have experienced the shame of being unable to stop shoveling food in your face, there is something you can do. Perhaps you have tried to stop your compulsive eating with an endless series of diets, exercise programs, or maybe even surgery, but keep returning to this behavior over and over again. You need to understand **WHY** you eat your feelings in order to, once and for all, find a solution that sticks.

As a compulsive eater, in a social situation you are aware, first and foremost, of the food around you. You scan the tray to see how much is there, how good it is, and how many calories are in it. Many of you can calculate the calorie counts of most foods better than that man at the carnival can “Guess your age and weight.” Perhaps you’re doing a balancing act in your head: How much can you eat without looking greedy? Can you ask for a second slice? Can you sneak a tiny bit more from that tray without being noticed?

Maybe your compulsive eating is done in secret. Late at night, when the house is quiet, you sneak down to the kitchen, open the refrigerator, and gaze longingly at whatever is there. Maybe, as you cook, you sample. I mean, you have to taste what you cook, right? No one will notice if you take a bit here, a little there, satisfying yourself while you are doing an important job.

Or maybe it’s the afternoon of a long weekend, and you’re alone and bored, and you can’t stop yourself. You return to that box of cookies (pretzels, candy) again and

again. You take only one each time, but after a while, all those trips add up and, before you know it, you've eaten the whole box.

Maybe when you're eating with others you compare yourself to all the other eaters in the room. First of all, you notice those who are overweight. "I'm not as fat as them," you think. "I have thinner legs (or stomach, or buttocks.) My (double) chin isn't as large as theirs." Maybe you notice what they eat, and you tell yourself how much healthier you are than them. You eat more protein, or more whole grains, or fewer carbs. If they're eating salad, you tell yourself, "They're in the extreme diet phase of their program. They'll probably go home and cheat late at night." Or, "They are such compulsive 'good' eaters, I'm glad I'm not like them. I'm so happy I no longer count points (calories, grams.)"

If the people around you are thinner than you, you may compare yourself to them in another way. You watch what they eat and wonder, "How can they get away with eating that when I can't? Why is their metabolism is so much better than mine?" Maybe they're eating something healthy. You wonder, "Do they really like it? Aren't they dying that they're missing that cake (french fries, ice cream)? Perhaps they take one tiny bite of something that, if you got even one taste, would start an avalanche of desire so thunderous that you couldn't stop. You begin to examine them like rare animals in a zoo. "How can they do that?" you wonder. "How can they eat only a little and stop?"

If you're a compulsive eater, you don't get a moment of rest when you're with other people. Even if you appear relaxed and entertained, when others around you are eating, your mind is constantly in motion, going pick, pick, pick as it tears down your self-esteem.

Maybe it's your deep, dark secret that you hide from the world.

You've tried losing weight before, so many times that you can't remember how many. Which diets have you tried? Every time you're online you scan for a new approach, because this one just might work. How many gym memberships or exercise classes have you paid for, only to quit in disgust when they didn't result in any change on the scale? How many times have you talked it over with your doctor or nutritionist, hoping that this person will somehow have the answer you can't find?

Each time you try and fail, the resignation sets in a little deeper. Maybe the disappointment is there, too, or maybe you're too numb to feel it any more. For a while, you avoid all those weight loss messages, not looking at the magazines in the supermarket or closing that window if you're on the internet. But then the desire, the longing, mounts again, and you try one more approach, one more time.

Perhaps you've decided, once and for all, to accept yourself just as you are. You throw away your scale, stop looking in the mirror, and decide to eat what you want and no more. That works for many, many people, right? Why can't it work for you? You turn a blind eye when your pants become too tight, when you have a harder time reaching down to tie your shoes, when you get out of breath walking up the stairs. But, gradually, you feel the change in your body. Perhaps one day you're in the doctor's office and you're appalled and ashamed at how much you weigh. Or someone posts a photo on Facebook and you're aghast at how truly fat you look.

As a compulsive overeater, I understand your pain, the agony you face every day. I've been there. I've tried over a dozen approaches to weight loss, with the

exception of bariatric surgery. This program doesn't promise any quick fixes or instant miracles. It doesn't promise one simple, easy solution to your compulsive eating issues.

What it does promise is compassion and understanding and uncovering the roots of your eating issues. Compassion that your compulsive overeating isn't a result of denial or lack of willpower or not being willing to do what it takes. Understanding the developmental experiences which drive your overeating. Recognition that they will not get fixed in one day, one week, or (in most cases) even one year. Acknowledgement that you have done everything in your power to deal with your compulsive eating habits and yet have not been able to make headway because you have lacked one crucial element: the ability to connect your eating habits with the emotional issues that created them.

This program explores a number of different developmental patterns linked to compulsive overeating and where they come from. These patterns aren't mutually exclusive. Everyone's emotional blueprint is different. Identifying the psychological issues which drive your own eating patterns can be an "ah-ha" experience. For some overeaters, a number of different elements of her life suddenly fit together as these patterns are explored.

Identifying your compulsive eating issues can be immensely relieving. It can become a way to develop more compassion for yourself. Gradually, you begin to understand that these odd quirks of yours have a rhyme and reason. They came about because you, as a child, never learned skills that other people did. You had to find different ways (sometimes eccentric, inefficient ways) to navigate these problem areas

in your life. This program can teach you new skills for dealing with these issues, and help you to develop your own roadmap for recovery.

The work of overcoming compulsive overeating isn't quick or easy. It's usually more of a marathon than a sprint. With time and understanding, however, these issues can be worn away until they hold only a fraction of the power they once did. As this happens, compulsive overeaters gradually become able to develop new eating habits which work for them.

It is only by working through these underlying issues that compulsive overeating is healed. This work may be the work of a lifetime, but what else are you going to do (to quote Mary Oliver) "with your one wild and precious life?" Are you going to continue to flit from one diet to the next, losing weight but then watching it all return, gradually losing any hope of finding a healthy, balanced way to eat?

If dieting hasn't worked for you, what else can you do? You can work to understand.

Tory Butterworth, PhD is a Licensed Professional Counselor who specializes in treating emotional eaters. Based on her training in the Bodydynamics body-mind psychotherapy program, Tory has created the STOP Eating Your Feelings treatment model which identifies four different developmental patterns underlying binge eating disorder. She has presented this model at The 26th Annual Renfrew Center Foundation Conference and the United States Association of Body Psychotherapy Conference. She currently uses this model in psychotherapy with emotional eaters, working with them individually as well as in therapy groups and workshops.

After receiving her PhD in psychology from the University of Michigan, Tory conducted research in medical decision making for ten years at the Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic and The University of Pittsburgh. She has authored articles in academic journals, written book chapters, presented at academic conferences, and was the co-investigator on two grants funded through the National Institute of Health.

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