

## **MISTAKING HUNGER**

You are not hungry most of the time. You are not always hungry when something smells good, looks good, or tastes good, whether or not you think you are. All food is prepared to tempt your taste buds, even though you're not hungry.

You are also not hungry because there is stress, a deadline, pressure, a personal or business problem, anxiety, tension, it's morning, afternoon, evening, when alone with friends, weekdays, weekends, daytime, nighttime, money problems, it rained, it didn't, came with the dinner, it was there . . . You are not hungry 24 hours a day, though you might think you are.

There are many daily food encounters: friends offering food, a maitre d' describing dessert, the smell of popcorn in a movie theater, to name but a few. Acknowledging the visual and emotional blitz helps interrupt the knee-jerk reaction that causes you to eat even though you're not hungry. Just knowing you are not hungry most of the time is a helpful piece of information.

You may even have pinpointed the reasons you're thinking of food, reasons that seem to justify your eating when you're not hungry. I've heard excuses as varied as "I got so angry because I couldn't get a cab" to "I got caught in a downpour without an umbrella." Many of these reasons might seem a valid enough reason to make you eat. They are not.

Certainly anger might tempt you to use food as a drug to keep the feelings down. If you eat when you're angry, does the anger go away? Or perhaps frustration weakens your resolve. At which point is your threshold for discomfort seriously challenged? Bored? At exactly which point does a yawn become a yep? Tired? When does food become a replacement for sleep?

Does the emotional pain diminish when you eat? Is the celebration any better because you come home stuffed, bloated, and full of gas, uncomfortable and with lowered self-esteem? Is it worth it?

Consider, if you will, that your past behavior has not worked. A clear vision of what you're trying to accomplish will. Most of all, you need a mind open to *the possibility of change*.

One man I almost taught was so afraid to change that he was locked into where he hung his coat, where I sat, and where he sat. He was terrified I was going to pull off his covers and yank away his security blanket of whatever food he was holding onto – whichever food he thought made him *comfortable*. He was so uncomfortable with even the thought of change, he would not tell me how much he weighed, or what he wanted to weigh.

Of course it's possible that some discomfort *might* occur while you're changing. The very act of weighing less than you did before is a change. And there is no change without change. But there are ways to lessen the discomfort of the journey from where you are to where you want to be; to offer options, suggestions, tactics, tips, tried and true assignments that work more and more as they are practiced. After all, you learned to use food to calm yourself down. You can learn a new method, a new automatic response.

Do you eat out of habit, not hunger? Identifying habits requires guidance, introspection, and patience, but most of all honesty. Once you acknowledge, "Yes, I do that," you can decide you don't want to do that anymore and begin to do something else, instead.

It is unrealistic and self-defeating to expect to go from habitual, compulsive, or addictive eating behavior to a calm, rational, in-control eating person by reading an article, even this article. You can, however, alter automatic, learned responses by creating new and effective alternative behaviors that will result in permanent change. The new behavioral choices add up to a permanent weight loss, incrementally, not rattattattat. It's worth repeating: Your original patterns *evolved* over a lifetime. Now you can consciously plan the person you want to be.

Food does not contain a narcotic. Food only has the power you gave it by doing the same thing with it each time you encountered it. Food has the power you vested in it as part of a ritual distraction with your mind, many times since childhood, when you might have learned how to cope with stressful situations by using food inappropriately. It might have worked then, but it's not working now. Now you need to find a new way that will work now.

I'll show you what to do if you are not hungry but are tempted. There are many things you can do when food is offered, baked, cooked, prepared, and present just for you. Learn how to handle the compelling urges at the office, in a restaurant, or at home. Learn that an umbrella-topped pushcart, wafting a familiar aroma, doesn't always mean you have to eat a hot dog.

Hunger demands to be fed. An urge passes. Know the difference? The next time you're at home and thinking of food, and you just ate a little while before, set a kitchen timer for 20 minutes and distract yourself with some activity. Sometimes I set the timer, get busy with some other project, and when the bell goes off, I not only forget I set the bell, I'm not even sure why I set it in the first place.

One woman recalled a walk she took one summer day. She spied a man eating an ice cream cone, (a visual stimulus). She used the mental repatterning techniques she'd created to

distract herself. She'd practiced and repeated the words, "Alert. Alert. Cross the street," which she did while laughing. She reassured herself that everything was going to be okay, and she prompted herself to calm her breathing. "Two minutes later, I'd found the most adorable sequined hat in a store window," she recounted. The moment clearly had passed.

The techniques were there in her memory bank because she had written the specifics of her plan, reviewed it daily to remind herself of the details, envisioned it in her mind, so that when the ice cream cone appeared, her new automatic response to say, "Alert. Alert. Cross the street, take a deep breath, and keep walking," kicked in. It is a process everyone can learn. It begins in your mind.

If you do not eat something when you normally would have, you might be particularly motivated to reach your goal weight for an upcoming wedding, class reunion, or birthday celebration. If you use will power, self-control, good intentions, and inner resolve, you'll find the results *temporary*. The next time the same circumstances or food appear, you may be a little less motivated or a little more angry, lonely, tired, or bored, and you'll probably eat the food, only to reinforce your old eating behavior, which is what caused you to gain weight in the first place. There is no *good intention*, *self-control*, *inner resolve* or *will power* sharp enough to cut through the layers and tentacles of your very practiced and polished ritualized eating habits – habits gone haywire. If you ever had good intention, self-control, will power or inner resolve, you would have used it 5, 10, 20, 30, or 50 pounds ago.

If, however, you begin to change your overreaction to food by doing something else, you might end up eating the object of your desire, but, you'll most likely not put as much on your plate, you'll eat a little less, stop a little sooner, and eat it a little less intensely than if you had not attempted some repatterning techniques.

The first time you do it the new way, it might feel awkward and uncomfortable. It is different from what you've done in the past. But no matter how uncomfortable you feel at the beginning of creating a new habit, nothing is as uncomfortable as having to choose what to wear based on how much of your body it will cover. Nothing is as uncomfortable as selecting what to wear based on what fits on a particular day rather than what is appropriate for a particular occasion.

Maintain a positive, *I can do it* mental attitude, and positive results happen. Avoid negative words about yourself, such as *bad* or *failure* or *I blew it*. They are just words and do not

apply to anyone who continues to try. "It ain't over until it's over," Yogi Berra said. I believe that.

For best results, attempt many kinds of change in your life. If drinking water doesn't help by itself, perhaps the water and deep breathing will be helpful. Sometimes water, deep breathing, changing location and calling a friend is what you need. *It is the action of taking an action — any action — that gets the result.* It almost doesn't matter which techniques you use to repattern — what is important is that you take a swift, purposeful, and immediate action. The quicker the action, the quicker the moment of anxiety passes.

It is possible that sometimes you might try every technique available and the moment is still difficult. It happens. But that doesn't mean you should stop trying. It just means your results have not quite accumulated enough to effect a noticeable change. It doesn't mean nothing is happening. It just might be too subtle for you to notice. Keep doing it anyway. It accumulates. Continue trying, and from each seemingly failed, imperfect human attempt, the structure of the old, destructive habit will be eroded another little bit . . . you will be that much closer to success which is eating only when hungry.

It took many episodes of reinforcing old behavior to create patterns as ingrained as the ones you are trying to change. It takes many steps of new behavior until you're hooked on the new way.

Sometimes one technique works, sometimes another. Every food encounter is different from every other one. Everyone responds to each stimulus differently and responds to repatterning techniques in a different way, too. A combination of several techniques may be just the ticket when one is not enough. Be creative.

Identify your eating patterns. Even the seemingly insignificant ones, such as *it's only broccoli*, or *I only drink black coffee* add up. Do you mean an orange has the same significance as a piece of candy? What ritual thinking is in your subconscious? Are leftovers a problem? Does food preparation end up being one for you and one for the pot? Does someone else serve you your food at home, in the office, in a restaurant? Do you finish everything served to you?

One woman I teach had the habit of *eating after eating*. She battled that habit for many months. When I spoke to her last week, however, she reported a two-week period when she did not once eat after dinner. This lifelong pattern had finally been laid to rest. She is 59 years old.

If you buy, prepare, serve, and accept *a little less* food, you'll eat less. Ultimately, *you'll be a little less*.

If you don't bring it into the house you won't eat it. Out of sight, out of mind.

If it doesn't taste good or look good or satisfy the eye and palate, don't eat it. We all belong to a nation of people who finish everything on their plate. That is not necessary. You may leave food over. It's okay. Food is wasted if you put it into a body that doesn't need it. Better to throw it away. If you order less the next time, there will be less to waste.

When you go off your program because you're human, you didn't blow it, weren't bad, or a failure. Don't beat yourself up. Simply get back on your program at the very next meal. Try to figure out what you could do next time the same thing inevitably happens. The quicker you're back on your program, the more you'll want to stay on your program. It is becoming comfortable, enjoyable, and preferred behavior.

Think of things you can do if you're thinking about eating but know you're not hungry.

This article is an excerpt from the book *Conquer Your Food Addiction* published by Simon and Schuster. Caryl Ehrlich, the author, also teaches *The Caryl Ehrlich Program*, a one-on-one behavioral approach to weight loss in New York City. Caryl welcomes questions or comments about this article and the behavioral methods she incorporates into her weight loss program.

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