

Food

ADDICTION

and the Weight-loss Surgery Patient

By Katie Jay, MSW

For people with food addiction, the decision to overeat is not a conscious one, at least not in the early days of your addiction. You do not wake up and think, “Rise and shine! Let’s get crackin’. Eat a box of donuts and lose some of that self esteem!”

No, it’s usually more like, “I’m going to be so good today...is that an *OREO*?”

Food addiction is a daily struggle for many weight-loss surgery (WLS) patients. It may be a week, a month, a year after surgery; but for about 70 percent of those who undergo weight-loss surgery, it happens.

Of course, having the smaller stomach and/or rerouted intestines that come with WLS can be a great tool to help control your eating, but if you had trouble with food before surgery, there is high risk of eating compulsively, overeating or even just obsessing about food after surgery.

What exactly is food addiction?

Addiction is a loaded word that unfortunately holds a negative connotation for many people. That is why I prefer the term eating disorder, but even that term is viewed negatively by some.

The truth is, though, that food addiction is a complex problem for which there is no one cause and no simple solution. No matter what you call it, food addiction or an eating disorder, the basic definition is the same: an unhealthy relationship with food.

Sure, there are more clinical definitions, but it all boils

down to one’s relationship with food – how you think about it, how you use it, why you use it and what your behavior with food does to you (obesity, shame, preoccupation, illness, depression, etc.).

In fact, shame and self loathing are such major factors in obesity and food addiction that I feel compelled to remind you that a food addiction is not a moral issue. It is not an affliction of weak-willed, lazy people. It is something that occurs in people of all ages, income levels, races and sexes. It has a strong genetic component, a relationship to brain chemistry and a cultural component (can you say, “Supersize me?”).

You do not set out to be addicted to food, or to be obese. Food addictions can develop over time, and are not always obvious in the early stages.

How do you know for sure you are “addicted” to food?

Food addiction is a vicious cycle of unhealthy eating, which brings on a sense of being hopelessly out of control, which brings on a desire to eat more food to numb the uncomfortable feelings.

The amount of food eaten, the types of food and the manner in which the unhealthy eating occurs varies from person to person.

Some people drive through a fast food restaurant and eat “in private” in their car. While others will get up at night to eat when no one else will observe them and criticize their behavior. Still, others hide food to sneak when the opportunity presents itself.



A Food Addiction is an Unhealthy Relationship with Food

Some people binge by eating as much food as possible in a short period of time. Others will eat more food than normal over the course of the day but never eat a large quantity at one sitting.

Some people obsess about certain foods, like sugary, salty, fatty or refined foods. Many people who use food in an addictive manner also obsess about their body and/or their weight.

You do not have to search far on the Internet to find a list of food addiction symptoms. Numerous quizzes exist to help a person determine whether or not they have a food addiction (see sample quiz on the next page).

What if you are a food addict?

As trite as it may sound, if you self diagnose a food addiction, you have taken an important first step. After all, if you do not know what your problem is, it is pretty hard to fix it. Research shows the number one reason people do not seek help with an addiction is they do not believe they can stop their self-destructive behavior.

I see that dynamic in my coaching practice every day. The number one reason most of my coaching clients avoided seeking help for so long is they did not believe they could stop obsessing about their eating, body and/or weight. They had such a track record of failure with weight-loss and weight control they felt absolutely hopeless.

If you feel hopelessly trapped by addictive behavior and you have decided not to seek help, remember that time and time again people who

A healthy relationship with food includes:

- Eating when you are hungry
- Stopping when you are full
- Eating without shame
- Eating to live (rather than living to eat)
- Not obsessing about food
- Not feeling guilty about eating
- Not eating secretly

An unhealthy relationship with food, or a food addiction, includes:

- Compulsive eating
- Overeating
- Obsession with food
- Secretive eating
- The feeling of being out of control with your eating
- Eating when you're not hungry
- Eating to numb emotions
- Eating past full, etc.

struggle with food addiction turn a corner and make real, permanent changes. It happens every day.

The secret to healing from food addiction is to not keep it a secret. If deep down you know you have a food addiction, you will find relief when you start to talk about it. You must seek help.

Many people who struggle with their weight never lose obsessive thoughts about food, but that is partly because they are not seeking help, trying strategies to find what will work for them and living in the solution.

The people most successful at breaking free from the burden of unhealthy eating have transitioned from being rebellious (reactive) to responsible (proactive). They stop looking for whose fault their food addiction is to whose responsibility it is.

Many factors will affect the treatment of your food addiction. I encourage you to leave no stone unturned as you search for solutions to your problem.

Action Steps for those Suffering from Food Addiction:

- Get help
- Seek counseling with an experienced eating disorder specialist of some kind
- Find an experienced life coach
- Attend support groups that focus on food addiction
- Do whatever you have to do to make the necessary changes in you and your environment



You may have an undiagnosed and untreated depression or anxiety disorder that, if left untreated, makes your food addiction much harder to deal with. There may be foods you could avoid that trigger you to overeat or obsess about food.

Maybe you have not learned how to nurture yourself in healing ways so that you do not use food to manage your emotions.

Food addiction is very common and nothing to be ashamed of. But, it is hard to get rid of it in isolation. Get help if you are struggling. And keep in mind, any addiction left untreated absolutely will control your life.

About the Author:

Katie Jay, MSW, is a nationally recognized expert on weight-loss and weight-loss surgery, CTA Certified Life Coach, and the director of the National Association for Weight-loss Surgery and author of [Dying to Change: My Really Heavy Life Story, How Weight-loss Surgery Gave Me Hope for Living.](#)



Food Addiction Questionnaire



Do you see yourself in some of these questions?

1. Has anyone expressed concern about your thoughts and/or behavior around your eating, body or weight?
2. Do you think or obsess about food, your eating, your body and/or your weight much of the time?
3. Do you binge on a regular basis, eating a relatively large quantity of food at one sitting?
4. Do you eat to relieve unpleasant emotions?
5. Do you eat when you are not hungry?
6. Do you hide food for yourself or eat in secret?
7. Can you stop eating without difficulty after one or two bites of a snack food or sweets?
8. Do you often eat more than you originally planned to eat?
9. Do you have feelings of guilt, shame or embarrassment when you eat – or afterwards?
10. Do you spend a lot of time calculating the calories you ate and the calories you burned?
11. Do you feel anxious about your weight, body or eating?
12. Are you fearful of gaining weight?
13. Do you tell yourself you'll be happy when you achieve a certain weight?
14. Do you feel like your whole life is a struggle with food and your weight?
15. Do you feel hopeless about your behavior with food, and/or your obsession with your body and weight?
16. Do you entertain yourself with thoughts of food and what you are going to eat next?
17. Do you weigh yourself once, twice or more daily?
18. Do you exercise excessively to control your weight?
19. Do you avoid eating or severely limit the amount of food you will eat?
20. Being totally honest with yourself, do you think you have a problem with food?



ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



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