

Comfort Foods –

Why do they make us happy?

by Kimberly Gorman, PhD, HSPP



“There, there. Just let me bake you some cookies.”

“Don’t cry. We’ll stop and get some ice cream, and it will all be better.”

Do these sound familiar? Maybe statements that you heard as a young child? They were innocent words and very genuine actions on the part of our caregivers to express love and concern to us when we were hurting. The way they knew to do this was through food – and not just any food. Usually, the foods offered were foods rich in fats and carbohydrates – the foods that we have come to term “comfort foods.” In this way, food has come to be used as a special type of medicine, as an anti-depressant of types, to cure the mood that ails us. However, such patterns can become very problematic, especially if it is a habitual pattern causing excessive weight gain.

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Scientists continue to research the effect that the chemical composition of foods may have on our moods. While such research is very valuable, I want to focus on the psychology, not the biology, of comfort food.

Food and Customs

All cultures have customs around food. In my childhood, money was scarce and when there was some kind of special occasion, it meant that we would use limited resources to buy special foods. It meant that we were being treated in a special way. Birthdays meant choosing a special meal and a type of cake and ice cream (within a budget). Funerals involved having food brought to the bereaved. The funeral ritual is one of special interest to this topic. The message is quite obvious: “I hope this food makes you happier.” Again, nothing is ill-intended and the gift is given with much love and care. However, it is another reinforcement of the use of food to make us “feel better.”

We are given messages early in our lives and then reinforced throughout our lives about how food can make us feel different, to feel better. Because we equate food with happiness, we continue to turn to food for such comfort. And we do feel happy or better, albeit temporarily.

Changing Patterns



1. The key to changing this lifelong pattern of equating food with happiness is to first be aware. Take some time to reflect on how food was used through your life and its connection to emotional states for you.
2. Next, take some time to reflect on your own emotional states. You may keep a feeling journal and write down how you felt each day. In reflecting, you will be more aware of the connection of food to your feelings in the past and more aware of your feelings in the present.
3. Then, the work begins. Take each emotion connected to food and create a list of other things you may do to tend to that emotion. For instance, you may have "sadness" as one emotion that has been connected to eating. Alternative ways to get comfort when sad may be:

- Talk to a friend
- Cry
- Journal your feelings
- Listen to music
- Write a song or a poem



4. By creating alternatives, you begin to see how you can break the cycle of comfort eating.
5. Post this list of alternatives in a place that you are likely to see it regularly. Consult it. Add to it as needed. Or mark things off that you have tried that maybe didn't work.

Food and Behavioral Conditioning

One important means of understanding the connection between food and behavior is understanding how we are conditioned to have a certain response when we are exposed repeatedly to a stimuli. In this case, when we have been told repeatedly that we can feel better with food (the stimuli), we believe that we do indeed feel better (the response) when we eat cakes

and cookies and such. However, what we don't think about is the other stimulus, the care, the concern, the love that came with the food and how that made us feel. In other words, we may have attributed our response (feeling better) to the wrong stimulus (food) rather than the one that actually did make us feel better, which was the love we felt.

So maybe it is not the food that makes us feel happy. Maybe it is the memory of these people expressing their love and care to us. Maybe that is what really makes us happy. Patients often tell me that they eat when sad, lonely or bored. They are seeking comfort.

They want to feel "full" or "satisfied" and the food does offer that physical release. However, the true comfort that they seek cannot be found in carbohydrates or fat, but it can

be found in the feeling of belonging, of connecting with others, of being creative and inspired.

Conclusion

Remember, you have had a lifetime of creating a pattern of using comfort foods, so it is not likely to change quickly. Make sure to give yourself some time to make these changes. When you are able to change the relationship with food, you are able to change your relationships with others, and you just might find more satisfying and healthier relationships.

About the Author:

Kimberly Gorman, PhD, HSPP, is a licensed psychologist and works with pre-op and post-op patients. She has been specializing in the area of eating disorders and body image for the past 12 years. She likes to emphasize the importance of empowerment in the change process and works hard to help patients gain this sense of control in their lives.





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.



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