

Food, fat and feelings

by Patrick Caplis, N.D.

Here we are again in the season of the flesh; bronzed bodies luxuriating at pools and beaches. Delightful, really! Except perhaps for the unfortunate many who must accept in exasperation the fact that they are out of the mainstream because they are also, to a greater or lesser degree, fat.

A culture, we show markedly little compassion toward fat people, even though sixty percent of adult Americans are ten pounds or more overweight. We glorify thinness and berate fatness — in the media, in our friends and in ourselves. Over the past twenty years, the monthly Playboy bunny has become

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progressively thinner and thinner to the point of sometimes approaching anorexic proportions. More than half of all U.S. women diet each year. Women's magazines invariably contain at least one new and exciting diet plan often with an advertisement on the following page for something like gooey rich chocolate cake with amaretto cream filling. The double message is, "Splurge on sweet fattening foods, but oh, God, don't let yourself get fat!"

The overweight suffer discrimination in education, employment and job promotion. Intolerance toward fat people is one of the few remaining socially permissible prejudices based solely on physical appearance.

Weight loss is also big business. Using diet

pills, books, surgery and weight-loss clinics, Americans spend an estimated \$10 billion every year in their quiet quest for thinness. Each year Americans lose (and often quickly regain) hundreds of thousands of pounds. But what is there about weight loss that makes it so difficult? And why so much pain for so little gain?

Exercise is the key. Several authors have recently stated or implied what most dieters knew all along. Namely, the fact that "diets don't work." The reason being that diets focus on restricting food intake. When you severely restrict calorie intake, your body thinks you're starving; it doesn't know about "diets." The body compensates by decreasing your metabolic rate which remains depressed for up to *one year* after you go off a diet. With a slower metabolism, many people actually seem to gain weight more easily after dieting. This means regular dieting can promote weight gain!

Contrary to what most diets espouse, the number of calories you consume every day (energy input) is much less important than the number of calories you burn off (energy output). This is why aerobic exercise is the key element in a successful weight-loss program. Aerobic exercise is any physical activity that increases your heart rate to 60 to 80 percent of your age-specific maximum. Brisk walking, jogging, swimming, cycling, rowing and cross-country skiing are all forms of exercise which will definitely help you to lose weight and keep it off permanently. And regular aerobic exercise not only helps with weight control; it also reduces your risk of heart disease, may prevent osteoporosis, and helps manage the stress and relieve the depression that sends some people on eating binges.

You are what you eat. The verdict is in: if you eat a lot of fat, you will have a greater tendency to be fat. Fats have more than twice as many calories per gram as carbohydrates. Protein contributes to weight gain because most sources of protein are high in fat. Most hard cheeses, for instance are 70 to 80 percent fat. Simple sugars like white and brown sugar, honey, fruit juices, dried fruit, molasses, alcohol, fructose, corn and maple syrups are also very nutrient-dense, high-calorie foods.

Beans, peas, whole grains (whole wheat, brown rice, oats, barley, corn), whole fresh fruits and vegetables together comprise a group of foods known as complex carbohydrates. Unlike simple sugars and white flour

products, complex carbohydrates are high in dietary fiber, which makes them filling. They are also low in fat and high in vitamins and minerals, which makes them nutritionally valuable. Many people think breads and pasta are fattening. Wrong. It's the butter and meat sauce that go on top that make them fattening.

Nutritionists recommend that 60 to 70 percent of what we eat should be complex carbohydrate foods. Eating small frequent meals emphasizing whole grains, beans, vegetables and fruits will decrease your craving for sweets, help you to shed those extra pounds and further you toward your goal of personal health and fitness.

We seldom think of eating as a political act, but in a world where 20,000 people starve to death every day, most of them women and children, we, the more fortunate, have a responsibility to our less fortunate brothers and sisters to look closely at how our eating habits might be contributing to their misery as well as ours. It requires ten pounds of vegetable protein (grains) to produce one pound of usable animal protein (meat). If Americans ate less meat and more grains and beans, we would undoubtedly be healthier, and at least theoretically, there would be simultaneously a tremendous increase in the available world food supply. Food for thought.

Food, fat and feelings. How we look on the outside is not separate from how we feel on the inside. Fat is a form of insulation; it shields us from what is "out there." Most weight-loss programs never delve into our inner world of feelings about ourselves and our relationship with food and other people, but in order for a person to allow a permanent weight loss, it is sometimes necessary to explore the deeper reasons why she or he became overweight in the first place.

A patient of mine, Emma, was physically abused by her mother throughout her childhood, at times literally thrown out of the house. As a young teenager, she began to put on weight while her mother struggled unsuccessfully to monitor and restrict her food intake. By her senior year in high school, Emma was 70 pounds overweight, but she was also big enough now to fight back, and sometimes she just laughed when her mother hit her. For the first time in her life, Emma felt safe.

Now in her mid-30s and attempting to lose weight, Emma is struggling with issues of low self-esteem, anger and a deep sense of insecurity. Only as her inner awareness and strength increase, will she be able to risk the

scary and vulnerable experience of letting herself return to her normal weight.

Many overweight people are foodaholics; they use food and sugar as their drugs of choice. When they feel depressed or anxious, they eat. When they feel unfulfilled in their lives and resentful about it, they eat. For Americans, pain is optional. With drugs or alcohol or food we can quickly numb away any unpleasant experience. But in so doing, we forget that suffering and pain have meaning; they are signals that can help us distinguish the right way from the wrong way. As a culture, we need to re-learn that it is O.K. to feel, and even more so, that it is O.K. to sometimes feel bad. For a lesbian or gay person who wants to lose weight, feelings may be a critical issue. The constant hiding of one's true identity, the stresses of day-to-day living, the difficulties of relationships, the anguish of feeling alone and unloved — all these can lead to overusing food as a way of comforting oneself.

Holistic weight loss. There is a long list of diseases associated with high fat diets and being overweight: heart disease, diabetes, certain cancers, gallstones, kidney stones, gout, chronic back pain and others. So in terms of your health alone, it is definitely better to maintain your weight within the normal range.

This is the plan: Don't starve yourself. Eat frequently and sensibly of meals high in complex carbohydrates and low in fats and simple sugars. Get up and move: walk, jog, dance, whatever. Start your exercise program slowly and don't overdo. If you are over 40 or have a serious health problem, get a physical examination before embarking on your new exercise regime.

Obviously, not everyone needs to do a deep soul-searching examination of the psyche in order to lose twenty pounds. But do stop to think about the stressors in your life and how you handle them. Are you a foodaholic? Do you try to use food to satisfy emotional needs? If you need help, find a counselor or physician or friend for guidance or support.

Summer is weight-loss season because Mother Nature is on your side. We tend to eat lighter low-calorie foods during the summer, fruits and vegetables are abundant, and we don't have that natural wintertime tendency to hibernate and add on layers of body fat in order to keep warm.

So . . . eat those complex carbs, enjoy lots of physical exercise, and dare to be as sensuously healthy and fit as you can — not for our weight-obsessed culture, but for yourself. Ready, set, good luck!

Patrick Caplis is a Portland-area naturopathic physician.

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