

Are You Disconnected??

As I was musing over what helpful insights I might share in this issue of “Don’t Weight”, I came across a book I read several years ago by Carol Munter and Jane Hirschmann. It's called *Overcoming Overeating*.

As I was flipping through it I felt that the chapter on compulsive eating would be a good follow up to the last issue of Don't Weight on food cravings for a couple of reasons. One, I think some compulsions get mistakenly labelled as cravings, and two, both elicit a fear of loss of control around food and eating. I venture that there are some readers who are skeptical about that whole “indulge your cravings” notion. In the last issue I described the Elaborated Intrusive Theory of cravings, and how they are generated from initial lack of recognition or acknowledgment of hunger. Compulsive eating is about a disconnect between hunger and eating as well.

Disclaimer:

To be clear-*Overcoming Overeating* (by Munter and Hirschmann, there are a lot of books with this title) is written as a guide to “break the diet/binge cycle”. I am not a therapist or eating disorders specialist. I write this newsletter to share information with and to support readers so they can make their own choices based on honest information and achieve the results they desire. I am a registered nurse and certified health and wellness coach. If you are being treated for eating disorders or other health conditions, please consult with your mental/health care provider before changing any prescribed therapy.

OK, back to the good stuff. Munter and Hirschmann (M &H from here on out) describe compulsive eating as a disconnection between food and hunger. It happens when we eat when we are not at all hungry. Compulsive eaters can be any size, thin or fat, short or tall, but they all FEEL fat and preoccupied with food and eating.

Many if not all of us have probably eaten when we weren't hungry at some time or another. We probably all have eaten past being full, for various reasons. And we've all eaten something when we were not hungry just because it looked good. But with a compulsive eater, there is a preoccupation with painful thoughts about your body and eating. “It's an all absorbing state of mind.” Some who have these obsessive thoughts *eat*, while some who have these obsessive thoughts *diet and restrict*. To me it's like two sides of the same coin.

My experience with folks who want to lose weight is that one of the first things they share with me is that they “just want to stop thinking about food all the time”. And they don't just mean the wanting to eat, but also the guilt, the body bashing and negative self-talk and bargaining that goes on in their head so much of the time.

Have you ever been in a meeting and there was candy on the table? Yummy candy-for me it would be chocolate. Some folks will just take some candy, or not. (really). A compulsive eater may spend the whole meeting wanting the candy, thinking they shouldn't have it, they shouldn't want it, that always wanting the candy is why I look like I do, what is wrong with me that I am thinking about candy and not paying attention to this meeting?! What did they just say? Ever experience this? You can reply to this email with "exhausting!" if you have.

M &H contend that compulsive eating is a response to anxiety, which may or may not be obvious. What seems like a crime to me is that most compulsive eaters have been led to believe that they have an eating problem. That they need to NOT eat. This leads to ignoring the body's hunger signals, and following rules and regulations around eating-which disconnects eating and hunger. So even when emotional and anxiety producing problems are resolved, if you still are not connecting and feeding hunger-you are not taking care of your needs, and you may still engage in compulsive hunger. The body fights back from being ignored (none of us like that do we?) and usually eating follows, with cycles of this-weight is gained/regained. Sadly what results from your body fighting to be recognized is labeled as a failure to control one's eating.

The first step to resolving compulsive eating is to recognize it as a sign of deeper unmet needs. This can take a little time, as not all moments of compulsive eating "feel" like moments of crisis or neediness. Rather, unlabeled discomfort leads to eating/food for comfort, followed by self-scolding for both eating and for being too big. Then the eating and the weight become "the problem". But what you really have is a "calming problem", not an eating problem!

Ironically, M&H suggest the solution to this calming problem lies in the basic experience of getting hungry and being fed (eating) to reestablish the connection between hunger and food.

I love how M&H discuss hunger and eating as our body's way of establishing physiologic and psychological well-being:

Infants panic and cry when they are hungry (those newborn hungry baby cries...unmistakable!) When they are fed (and have a clean diaper) they learn that their needs are reliably met. This, along with many interactions and experiences associated with feeding, create a sense of security in the newborn that is a foundation for mental wellbeing.

Feeding our hungry selves throughout our lifetime is physiologically AND psychologically nourishing. For non-compulsive eaters this is reinforced often and is felt to be quite ordinary.

Compulsive eaters use food as self-medication, not fuel. And instead of meeting their needs when hungry, they tend to engage in "not eating" (i.e dieting) which strengthens the disconnect between hunger and food, and reinforces the idea that their needs won't be met.

Non-compulsive eaters get a "hungry" signal and most often they then feed themselves (they eat!). That signal, which M&H refer to as "**stomach hunger**" (emptiness in stomach, tummy growling, hunger pangs) is NOT what usually sends compulsive eaters in search of food. They more often eat from "**mouth hunger**" or psychological hunger.

Here's an interesting list of some **mouth hunger signals**-see if you recognize any of them.

Eating just because

- The food is there
- It looks so good
- It's meal time
- Someone took the trouble to make this food for you
- It would be a shame to waste it
- You feel sad, lonely, depressed
- You feel happy, excited, feel like celebrating

Now, we all do some of these some of the time. But compulsive eaters eat for these kinds of reasons far more than for stomach hunger. If you are not sure and want to find out if you are a compulsive eater, you can track yourself to develop and awareness of how often you eat from mouth vs. stomach hunger. (You can download a free tools for this in Coaches Corner!)

As you use the tool, it is important to remember that you are not trying to intervene or change behavior at this point. (see more notes in coaches corner)

You might predict that the next step would be to identify WHY you are eating from mouth hunger, what is causing anxiety or discomfort and to resolve those issues.

But according to M&H, the fix is in learning to feed yourself again so you can reestablish the connection between hunger and food/eating. The goal is **not** to *stop eating from mouth hunger* but to learn to *recognize and feed stomach hunger*. This will lead to eliminating mouth hunger.

Feeding stomach hunger you

- Give your body the fuel it needs
- Give your mind the message that your needs are worthy of your attention, and that you indeed can meet them.

So, how to do this?? M&H recommend "Demand Feeding for Adults", which is exactly what it sounds like.

- Every time you feel stomach hunger, you EAT.
- You eat until you no longer feel stomach hunger.
- You abandon all external cues for eating: calorie charts, points, mealtimes, social gatherings,
- There may be days you eat twice a day, days you eat 6 times a day.

There may be times or situations where this does not seem practical, but the more you practice feeding stomach hunger, the sooner you will reconnect hunger and food, and the sooner you will trust yourself to meet your needs.

Little note: don't just write off situations that seem tricky automatically. Maybe you can talk with your employer, your family/friends for consideration and support. Or choose to demand feed when you are home or in situations that make it accessible to you. Other days you can still track awareness of stomach vs. mouth hunger.

I think we'll talk more about this in a later episode, but you may be thinking, "OK, what do I feed myself??" I do suggest trying to eat in as attuned a way as possible, being gentle with yourself. Try to feed yourself what you are really hungry for...hot/cold, sweet/savory, smooth/crunch etc. This is the exact opposite of restriction-even if what you find yourself wanting is broccoli and bananas not chocolate chip cookies and pie! It can be hard to tune into your own signals and desires when you are trying hard to follow Food Rules. When you do choose to implement a dietary pattern, you should understand it and really desire to follow it because you want the *benefits and you want to do it*. There should be no "I can't have that" or "I should have that" but instead there is "this is the way I eat and drink because it is what I choose". Trust yourself. You won't always be perfect, but you will know when you are not, and you will adjust when you do, if you decide to.

You may know one of the ingredients in my Recipe for Optimal Health is a low-fat whole food plant based diet. But if you are a compulsive eater, (these are my recommendations, not from M&H)

- take time first to reconnect hunger and eating-it's important to do this first
- build your confidence and trust that your needs will be met.
- educate yourself about a healthy dietary pattern,
- CHOOSE what you WANT to do and commit to it (what gets you where you want to go?)
- make a plan to do that
- take action steps to do it.

+Some **additional references** that supported Munter and Hirshmann's ideas in "Overcoming Overeating"

Hussenoeder, F.S., Conrad, I., Engel, C. *et al.* Analyzing the link between anxiety and eating behavior as a potential pathway to eating-related health outcomes. *Sci Rep* **11**, 14717 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-94279-1>

- Anxiety was positively associated with disinhibition (eating without restraint) and hunger but not to cognitive restraint (making conscious choice to refrain).

Mindsets of Health and Healthy Eating Intentions: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12589>

- Growth health mindsets (good health is possible, likely, health improvement is available, optimal health is possible) are associated with intention to eat healthier foods and their mindset about their ability to make those choices influenced this intention (meaning if people believed they could make good choices for themselves, they were more likely to do so). This study supports the adage “people are much more likely to change if they 1) believe it will help them and 2) they believe that they can.

Mindset Matters Most

I talk in this issue about anxiety and its connection to compulsive eating. This video shares a surprising spin on stress. Sometimes we just think of stress as “bad for our health”, but shifting your mindset about it can shift its effect. Kelly McGonigal is a fave of mine. This is just 10 mins.

[How to make stress your friend | Kelly McGonigal | TED](#)

Coaches Corner

Before you run off and print and use this tool (btw-let me know how you like it if you do!)
Remember a few things please.

- Always journal or track with curiosity and gentleness-not judgement. You are making objective observations not a character assessment.
- You are also not trying to intervene and change behavior at this point.
- Remember: In any given moment we are all doing the very best we can.

To Use This Tool: When you go to eat, or when you find yourself eating, assess if you are feeling mouth hunger or stomach hunger. Note the date/time on the tracker, along with the number that corresponds with why you are eating. (1-9=mouth hunger, 10-15=stomach hunger) or just write M/S. Either way you can tell at a glance if you are eating more “M” or more “S”. (Easy is good!)

Look at the journal each day you use it. Keep using it until you have a good sense of mouth versus stomach hunger.

If you start Feeding on Demand, and you feed yourself when you are hungry-you will notice more marks in the stomach hunger column. The more you feed yourself when you are hungry, the more your bodymind feels and knows you are meeting its needs and self-trust is established. The more you will learn to reach for food as fuel.

Changing habits and behaviors can take a long time, so be patient and kind with yourself. Reach out for support if you need it. This isn't a magic process, but one I hope can inform and help you reach your goals for your best life.