

Food – Let Battle Commence

Food is big news - eating disorders, childhood obesity, the size zero debate – the media coverage is endless. Fat is now entertainment and we can sit back and watch celebrities comparing their weight loss or despairing teenagers preparing for gastric band operations.

Food is embedded into our lives. It sustains us and it gives us pleasure in the cooking, tasting and sharing of it. Irrespective of seasons, supermarkets spread their multi-coloured, exotic wares out for us. We read about it in books and magazines and watch as chefs become celebrities and reality TV stars. We surround ourselves with it but many of us also fight to avoid it. Cook books jostle for shelf space with volumes offering salvation through dieting. Do we give up fat, are carbs our enemies, do we choose skinny jeans or cheesecake?

Medical advice tells us that being overweight is bad for our health and of course we feel better when we look in the mirror and like the person reflected there. So if we overindulge on Christmas pud or return from holiday with a few extra pounds as well as a suntan, there can be no harm in losing a little weight. But how many people can lose weight sensibly without it turning into an emotional experience.

All the statistics tell us that many people who have successfully embarked on a weight loss programme then tend to put the weight back on and yo-yo dieting becomes an inevitable part of life for many of us – food evolves from enjoyment and fulfilling a basic nutritional need into an extremely powerful emotional tool. So why do we sabotage it all? Why do we think about food, crave it, have battles with it and ultimately lose the war with it. Any sensible person knows that all it takes is eating less and taking more exercise so why is it so difficult?

And if a diet is successful, why do we tend to believe that every other part of life should fall neatly into place? There is a seductive script running through our heads telling us that if we are thin we are travelling the magical road to fulfilment but success at losing weight doesn't automatically mean that new job, a great relationship or more friends. It certainly gets more of one thing – attention. It seems that everyone wants to know how we reached that perfect target. But somehow most of us end up putting the weight back on.

From pre-birth we are dependent for our survival on someone (usually our mother) to feed us. It fulfils a basic need and when we are being fed we are usually being held, providing comfort and reassurance. Thus, from the very beginning food takes on an extra dimension. Mums know that crying babies often becomes quiet and contented when feeding and, in turn, they become content. Thus, both mother and child feel the benefit.

That first comfort lesson lingers. When the baby becomes a toddler and shows signs of distress it can be easy to provide instant reassurance with food. How often is food offered for reasons of comfort, bribery, or reward rather than for reasons of hunger? If the link remains too strong it continues into adulthood and provides the ammunition for an ongoing battle of wills with food. We can stuff down the emotions of a row with our partner or a terrible day at work but the price of that short term comfort is high as we become enslaved to the ups and

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downs of the dieting game. We need to shatter that link so that food becomes part of our lives rather than the ruler of it.

Of course there are many factors that enter into the success or failure of a weight loss plan but I believe for those of us who have been caught in the yo-yo trap, we need to address our real issues about food before we have any chance of conquering our dieting demons. And should we be addressing our body image issues before we even consider losing weight? Many of our feelings and thoughts are hidden even from ourselves and unless they can take flight through being voiced and heard they, and we, remain isolated. We need a safe, supportive environment where our voices can really be heard and that is within the counselling room. This is where we can discover our past, explore our present and prepare for our future. And this is where we may make our peace with food and learn to truly enjoy it.