

Overcoming Eating Disorders (Part 1)

Success with Chinese Medicine

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I've been in jail for a large part of my life. Not the kind with guards and guns, but a worse one to my way of thinking. For about 15 years of my life I was a bulimic foodaholic. At the time I didn't know bulimia was a disease, or that addiction to food could be the result of a deep hole in my centre that I was constantly trying to fill.

I remember distinctly the feeling of high tension and anxiety, followed by a rush of relief and relaxation when I decided to loose the chains and eat. The overwhelming obsession with the fear of getting "fat" made me immediately dispose of the food, and that was followed by a despair that is hard to put into words. I felt isolated from the rest of the world by my revolting "habit" that had to be a secret because the shame of it was so intense I thought any exposure would kill me.



Food had a hold over me to the extent that going for a casual lunch was like walking through a mine field. I knew, if I came off my strict diet, I would lose control and binge. The anxiety grew and grew and, consequently, so did the bulimia, coupled with self-loathing. I lived in London, England, at the time and remember vividly getting up in the middle of the night, unable to fight my demons and, like one possessed, roam the dark, rainy streets for a chocolate machine to ease my pain.

One major hurdle to each day was a doughnut store that I had to pass on my way to work. Some days I'd get safely past, other days I'd buy a dozen and take them back to my flat and call in sick. I'd spend the day in a sugarholic daze feeling alienated, alone and miserable.

I joined Weight Watchers, but was unable to follow the program. I'd go to meetings religiously to weigh in and hear the talk, but would buy chocolates to gorge on on the way home. I felt possessed by a force over which I had no control. Somehow, each time I recovered enough equilibrium to get a hold of myself, I'd put extra bars on my jail and make new resolutions to "pull myself together" only to have them fall apart the moment the obsession returned. I went through life with a smile on my face. I was strong, I was secretive and I was dying inside.

It was by a rather circuitous route that I discovered I had a disease called bulimia. It so happened that a friend of mine, a pilot with a large company, had a serious drinking problem, although he didn't think so. He lived above a pub and never traveled without a gin and tonic in his hand, thankfully by taxi. He swore he could "take it or leave it" –I just never saw him "leave it". I began to attend AA meetings to help him – what happened was that I helped myself.

The meetings were an eye opener. I understood alcoholism because I could understand the alcoholic's pain and obsession. Seeing other people deal with a life-threatening disease made me feel less alone. For the first time I was able to stand back a little from my pain and realize that, in many ways, I was like the people at the meetings. My addiction was different only in the fact that I could keep it a secret. An alcoholic, on the other hand, could destroy his life and end up on the street.

The first meeting was my first step to recovery because I saw what I had as something tangible, something I could separate myself from and say "Ah, that's what I've got. Now, what can I do about it?" The relief was enormous. The fact that I had an addiction and, eventually, the discovery that what I suffered from had a name enabled me to separate my self-loathing from myself. I became ready to accept help and went for counseling. Therapy was intense, painful, emotionally consuming and difficult. The amazing thing was that I didn't die: for the first time in my life I began to live.

My traumatic experience with food helps me to understand what nutritional counseling can mean to a vast number of people. I find that I have to assess each situation before choosing the kind of help to offer. For example, with someone complaining of poor digestion and with no history of a food disorder, I would use the Chinese medicine approach of seeing food on an energetic level. In this instance, I'd address the Yin/Yang (Cold/Hot) balance in the body, which is like an internal thermostat. If you've got a "cold" syndrome (too much Yin), which could show as a feeling of being cold and tired with a pale complexion and perhaps even some diarrhea and profuse urination, eating raw food (considered cold in energy) like salads, or drinking ice cold water would exacerbate the cold and make the problem worse. Vice-versa, those exhibiting a "Hot" syndrome (too much Yang), like itchy eczema with red, raised sores, eating hot, spicy food is going to exacerbate the heat and make the eczema worse.

If, on the other hand, there are a lot of emotions attached to food, the approach has to be totally different. A dramatic example of this was a young woman who was so afraid of the chemicals in food that she was on a literal starvation diet. Her strict regimen of "healthy" eating was causing her body to react by making her so allergic that her choices of what to eat were diminishing fast. Her problem wasn't foodaholism or bulimia, but was just as damaging. Her stress was extreme and her body looked as though it was so tightly woven together there was no room for movement. She had a haunted look and her life revolved around the preparation of the little she could eat.

Restricting her even more, or concentrating on her allergies would have no impact. Instead, I suggested she play a game with herself. She was to let her mind soar and imagine she could eat anything she wanted without restrictions. She was to go into a supermarket and let that free, childlike part of her choose her food for her.

This, of course, was not what she had come for. She wanted help with her allergies, but some seed took root because she agreed to try, out of desperation if nothing else. Her imagination was so deadened it took her a good month of returning home empty-handed before there was even a flicker of light and excitement.

Her progress was very slow and each week we worked with acupuncture and deep relaxation to get her flow of energy circulating, to release the "tight weave" holding her body together and to make her more aware of where she was hanging on. As the "prison bars" began to melt she was able to accept her unhealthy attitude to food and to find a therapist who could help her unearth the reasons underlying her mind set. Allergies are common these days, and most nutritional counseling and treatments would

be geared to alleviating them, but this was a powerful example of the mind/body connection and the body screaming to be heard.

Stuck energy, or Qi, can cause painful digestion and a myriad of other problems, but so can stuck emotions, which is why emotions play a large part in Chinese medical theory. For example, anger congests the Liver energy which, in turn, can flow over and put a squeeze on the Stomach energy, causing digestive problems, such as bloating, gas, nausea, constipation or diarrhea. Stress can affect the Stomach too, often turning into heat. In this case, eating too much hot, spicy food and alcohol can create more heat which can rise and affect the gums causing ulceration. Acupuncture and herbs can certainly help, but if the underlying emotions aren't dealt with it will be a long haul. Somebody wrote that we'd be much better off if we ate what was bad for us with a calm and peaceful mind than what was good for us with anxiety. I agree one hundred per cent.

We know what's bad for us, we know about diets, we have an idea what makes our digestion work and what doesn't, and we're extremely good at guilt tripping ourselves, but we don't always know why we can't stick to a healthy, balanced way of eating. What I see in my clinic is not so much that people don't understand what's good for them, it's the struggle of dealing with the emotions of wanting certain foods. Many people have a poor self image and put enormous dietary restrictions on themselves. After all, in our society, putting on weight is a very public manifestation of one's apparent loss of self-control.

Recently, a slim and very together friend of mine, who has had a history of bingeing and obesity, found herself putting on a little weight around menopause. She immediately began to "diet" and found herself in an alarming yo-yo of sudden weight gain followed by a sudden loss. She went to see her family doctor who, knowing her history, advised her to stop dieting at once and to exercise more. He said that her earlier eating habits had set up a chemical imbalance in her body and that any attempt, even 20 years later, to diet had triggered old body habits. She was never bulimic, but to this day has a terror of the scales.

We could all benefit from emulated the easy-going Pooh. Who could love honey more than he? In the *World of Pooh* there's a wonderful description of him trying to catch a Heffalump with a jar of honey. But, before leaving the bait, he checks it out with a lick. The rest, of course is history. He manages to stop before consuming the whole jar but, in the middle of the night, finds the longing too much. Rushing back to the pot he dives in to finish it off, getting his head stuck in the process. Perhaps because he's a bear with a "very little brain" he's able to handle the indignity of being found by Christopher Robin with grace. Whatever the reason, we could all learn from him. Instead of giving himself a guilt trip or going on a diet, they have a good laugh about it and go home together for breakfast!

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