

JOURNALING AS AN AIDE FOR OVERCOMING EMOTIONAL EATING (1-8-06)

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Journaling can be a very useful activity for people trying to gain more control over their eating behaviors. This can be especially true when trying to control aspects of eating related to feelings and emotions. “Emotional Eating” can be defined as the consumption of food in response to a feeling other than hunger. People often consume food when not really hungry, but when they are feeling bored, worried, nervous, alone, sad, or angry. Journaling as an adjunct to a program of weight loss that includes exercise and healthy eating habits/diet can further help people to gain control over their eating habits. I will describe two types of journals I use with clients during psychological treatment, when one of their treatment goals includes gaining control over “Emotional Eating.” If readers decide to use the journals I describe below, they should not consider the use of them as a substitute for professional medical or psychological treatment. The use of such journals is best applied in combination with working on emotional, psychological, and interpersonal issues (often discovered through journaling) and within the context of a professional relationship such as with a licensed psychologist or other mental health professional.

Benefits of Journaling

One of the benefits of journaling is that it serves to increase people’s awareness about why they are eating and the roles food plays in their lives. Similarly, it allows people to decrease their use of denial in regards to eating for emotional reasons rather than only when hungry. It also helps people identify other goals to work on that might otherwise get overlooked in a weight loss program that focuses only on diet and exercise alone. Such problems or goals can be critical to lessening a person’s use of food for emotional reasons. The reason professional help sometimes becomes necessary is that some of the problems people are avoiding or ignoring, once identified through journaling, can be difficult or complicated to change by one self. Such problems may include marital or family problems, underlying problems with depression, worry, or anxiety, unresolved histories of child abuse, and negative effects from other abusive relationships, problems related to body image or self-esteem. People should not hesitate to seek help, for example from a mental health professional, when personal problems are identified that are too difficult to change by themselves.

Two Types of Journals

The journaling consists of two written records. One is a “Food and Liquid” (F&L) journal and the second is a “Stress and Wishes” (S&W) journal. In the F&L, you record everything you eat and drink, in detail, every day. You record quantity and size of food portions, whether you use non-fat, low fat, or full fat items or condiments, etc. Some people use a daily calendar to record food and liquid intake. This also allows them to record the time of day they have eaten, which can be useful when understanding emotional eating patterns.

The second journal, S&W or “Stress and Wishes” has several purposes. In this journal you record and write about the stressors you experience everyday. Stressors include problems, difficulties, irritations (even if you think they are small in nature), things that “bug” you, things that make you mad or even a little bit annoyed. If you persist with this format of journaling, trying to work up to writing at least one page per day in the S&W journal, various effects occur. You will discover the extent of actual problems in your life and start to work towards seeing how your eating habits are affected by them. In addition, you should complete every day’s S&W journal entry with further writing about what you “wish” would or could happen differently in your life. It is essential that you force yourself to consider and write about your “wishes” at the

end of every journal entry. It is hard to describe the power in journaling about “wishes” without people actually doing it for several weeks. It helps to include the word “wish” in your journaling too, as a means of clearly focusing on them. The power inherent in writing down wishes is that it serves to clarify your needs and feelings. It also leads people into considering actions that are likely to enhance their lives, reduce stress, and ultimately reduce their use of food as a method of emotional comforting. Writing about “wishes” decreases the use of denial that is very prevalent in people’s habits of emotional eating. Thereafter, people are encouraged to use their “wishes” as a guide toward defining goals for themselves, and to continue journaling and building skills that help to achieve them.

In addition, journaling often helps people realize how food is used for something other than hunger or nutrition. Frequently, people identify foods that are “very important and individually special” to them. “Friendships” with certain foods, often carbohydrates, sugar based, or fat-laden, are typically identified. Journaling also usually reveals how food has come to replace healthier coping strategies, such as reliance on other people for support and companionship. There are usually multiple reasons why food has replaced people as a source of comfort or companionship, and it is for these reasons that professional help is sometimes necessary if only briefly. Eventually, “food as a source of comfort or companionship” will need to be replaced by learning to rely on other people and healthier activities.

When the above two journals are used in combination with exercise and healthy eating/dieting, they can enhance a person’s awareness about eating for emotional reasons. They can point toward areas in their life that are in need of attention or modification. Again, professional help may become necessary at some point while journaling, for example, if problems are identified that are beyond a person’s ability to solve or manage by themselves. People also learn to be more truthful and honest with themselves regarding their relationship with food and the emotional reasons they consume food excessively or choose unhealthy foods over healthier ones. Change is possible, if you don’t give up trying and if you don’t give into the habit of trying to deny or overlook other important stressors or problems in your life. Help from others—seeking and asking for it—is a challenge for most people, but especially for people who have learned to replace reliance on others with food consumption.