

THE RITUAL OF FOOD ADDICTION

If you've been trying to figure out the weight-loss game for as long as I've been coaching people – twenty five years – you've most likely been trying to avoid food, even though that point of view has not worked. What you need to do is to look at the ritual leading up to the part where you finish everything on your plate.

For many years I had either a radio show or a public access television cable show named “Changing Habits.” The opening of both shows state: we cover eating, smoking, gambling, drinking, shopping, spending, and negative thinking. There was also discussion about low wage earning, debt accumulation, messy apartments, and procrastination. All of these things have something in common: they can be ritualized.

I, too, was seduced by the mesmerizing effect I felt when I was in the mindless, automatic state of a ritual. When in that state of mind, you're comfortable without having to think or feel anything else. I smoked cigarettes, spent too much, drank too much, and went into debt as if I were in a trance. Writing this book became a behavioral ritual; there was always another chapter to write or re-write or edit or type. I'm in the middle of construction in my apartment. What began as re-doing a bathroom and kitchen floor has turned into buying new furniture and designing built-ins.

One tiny part of the redecorating process was looking for knobs for cabinet doors. There were hundreds of styles and shapes and colors and prices from which to choose. I don't even want to tell you how many choices I had to make when it came to selecting a couch.

Whether gambling or drugging or eating, or writing a book, there is a ritual of things we do, and say, and think, before, during, and after the actual using of the *drug*. And I use the word

drug here because a behavioral ritual is just as much a drug on your system as is food, or cigarettes, or alcohol.

The gambler knows the phone number of off-track betting or his/her bookie by heart; a bartender remembers your usual drink; you shop whenever you're bored. The drinker has a favorite drink with a specific amount of ice or mixer or water. He/she might sip the drink rhythmically, with or without others at specific times of the day or week or year, and many people only drink in particular places, i.e., it never occurs to me to order alcohol in a Chinese restaurant. Whereas my friend Tom always orders a beer and friend Sara orders one large and one small sake when in a Japanese restaurant. Each part of a ritual knits with the other parts to tighten the behavior more and more effectively. Add to your list the way you lock, and unlock, the door to your home or office, answer your phone, call a friend, get ready for bed, set your hair, or comb your moustache.

When I smoked, there was the buying and smoking of the cigarettes. But there was also my cigarette-case collection, a Dunhill lighter, and I used a Lalique ashtray, for goodness sake. I added additional behaviors to my ritual, too: I needed to shop for and have on hand, lighter fluid for the lighter and extra mouth spray and mouth wash to use after I smoked each cigarette.

The *ritual paraphernalia* is just as much a part of your eating- or smoking- or drinking-habit as the lighting-up and inhaling of a cigarette, or the swallowing of a bite of food. Each habit has its own ritual actions and reactions.

Think about other rituals and habits you mindlessly perform each day: You brush your teeth, shower, shave, or put on makeup. Checking on mail or retrieving telephone answering-machine messages may be a part of your repertoire. I've recently added to my ritual, the periodic checking of my email to see if "I've got mail."

Getting dressed in the morning is ritualized, too. You might comb your hair and put on makeup, then put on clothes. Some others put their clothes on first, and then comb their hair and put on makeup. I eat breakfast and take my one-a-day, two-a-day, three-a-day vitamins, minerals, and calcium pills. I even arrange them on a paper plate in four little piles for easy access later. That's a ritual, too. That's what we do:

We organize, and ritualize, so we can narcotize.

All this *busy work* distracts you, at least for the moment, from feelings or thoughts with which you don't want to deal.

I've practiced and perfected many constructive rituals into my life. After doing them consistently for many years, they are now automatic, and mindless and serve my needs. They help make my day run smoothly, like using a pencil when I write in my appointment book. There is comfort in the familiar.

It is the ritual of the first thought or word or action that leads to the next thought or word or action to the next, and the next, and the next. Eventually, you succumb to what you think is the allure of the taste or smell or even sight of food. But it is really the tail end of a ritual where you might be tired or bored and just used to surrendering to whatever is set before you. Some of us eat as an excuse to take a break, or to rest. It is hard to say no because it is all knitted together from the first thought of a ritual to the first feelings of remorse. There's always remorse. That's part of the ritual, too. This cycle of behavioral ritual needs to be interrupted and unraveled. Identifying these patterns, even acknowledging you have patterns, is a wonderful first step in changing habits.

As you become more aware of your patterns of thought, word, and action, you can begin the process of rearranging or omitting the automatic *next steps* and to create new constructive

patterns for yourself. Eventually, you'll learn to be comfortable thinking, saying, and doing, something else instead of putting food into your mouth, just because *it's there*.

This unraveling of the ritual of food addiction helps you to make pro-active choices so you can become the person you want to be. Sometimes, the new way is quite different from what you've accumulated in the way of behavior. Your old way was built over a lifetime of unconscious actions and reactions. You now have the opportunity to create something new and wonderful that better serves your present need to weigh _____ pounds.

Bobby F. danced the *I can go all day without eating, but once I start, I can't stop* tango, a remnant from a previous weight-loss plan.

Since evening activities weren't as stimulating as the daytime ones, he was without things to occupy his mind; old feelings and thoughts bubbled up. With no place to go and no one to talk to, he incorporated going into the kitchen into his usual evening activity of *killing time*. One trip to the kitchen yielded a piece of candy, another trip yielded a nibble of leftover salad, another trip two grapes. The once- or twice-a-night ritual became more and more frequent. It really took off when he had a phone installed in the kitchen. He found himself sitting on a chair with wheels while speaking on the phone and rolling over to the refrigerator where he'd open the door and window-shop the shelves.

When he worked on breaking that ritual, I had him put a little tick mark on a piece of paper whenever he thought of putting something into his mouth. Between 9 p.m. and midnight, he found himself thinking about food forty-two times! That is approximately one episode every five minutes.

Forty-two times in three hours he had gotten in the habit of putting something in his mouth, even though he wasn't hungry. Forty-two times he nibbled a bite of this and a swallow of

that, just because he was bored. Whether eating one item, or one bite from many items, it all adds up. It doesn't matter if it is salad or soda. You're eating when you're not hungry. If you practice this habit every day of the week, you've got a behavioral addiction that becomes a weight gain. Keep doing the same thing and it becomes a part of the evening's entertainment. When Herman moved the phone out of the kitchen, the picture changed. His weight changed. His habits changed. This was just one of many patterns he discovered as a result of being mindful. There were even more to find.

He realized how he always ordered a glass of wine when he took clients to dinner; or how each meal ended with a cup of coffee. Every visit to a theater to see a movie seemed to be bonded to eating a bag of popcorn or buying a soda. The buying – I call it a compulsion to spend – is a ritual, too.

When I talked about rituals with another person I teach, she commented that keeping the logbook, in which she enters her daily weights and what she eats, was a ritual. I agreed. Some rituals help us to become mindful of what it is we are doing and enable us to see, in writing, the patterns we've created. Some rituals are better than others.

Barbara J. had difficult times at 4 p.m. each day. It was clear that her desire to eat wasn't about hunger; her lunch was usually only a few hours before. It was connected to her children arriving home from school. When she had to prepare food for them, she mindlessly nibbled on the food herself. She also had a phone in the kitchen and practiced some version of talking on the phone and browsing amongst the bratwurst. You may be thinking: But I only pick at the broccoli. If you're eating when you're not hungry, it doesn't matter what it is. It all adds up.

In an office, an eating ritual might begin at the onset of a coffee-wagon bell ringing at 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. Rachel S. told me of a mindless habit she had when she commuted from

Manhattan to her home in New Jersey. Every trip, five days a week for a year, she'd eat a candy bar. Just that one candy bar habit could add up to approximately twenty pounds by year's end.

I used to have a habit of buying a large bottle of fruit juice and would sip it a few swallows at a time – it's only juice I used to think – until all 64 ounces were sipped away and I'd buy another bottle. When I realized how often I repeated this behavior, I began buying juice in individual bottles of 4 ounces each, put the bottles on a different shelf than the top one in the refrigerator. If I didn't see it, I didn't think about it. If I didn't think about it, I didn't drink it. The habit started to collapse on its own. Sometimes, changing just one part of a ritual – whether thought word or action – loosens the entire knot of behavior without much effort. Sometimes it takes more thought. In this case, changing the size of the container did the trick (a physical action). I also thought (mental re-patterning), that I'd gone years without drinking juice so many times during a day and it had always been okay. It could be okay again. You get used to anything.

What are some of your rituals and habits?

This article is an excerpt from the book *Conquer Your Food Addiction* published by Simon and Schuster. Caryl Ehrlich, the author, also teaches *The Caryl Ehrlich Program*, a one-on-one behavioral approach to weight loss in New York City.

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