

Overeating: Addiction or Not?



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Seminar in Contemporary Trends:
Addictions

What Is It?

- Patients eat in excess uncontrollably
- Food becomes an obsession rather than a necessity
- Overeating not just due to emotions or hunger



Symptoms

- People eat more than originally planned
- Need to eat to feel better emotionally
- Afterwards, there is a feeling of regret, tiredness or lethargy



- Ashton, 2011

Symptoms

- Physical
 - May use laxatives, exercise, etc. to avoid weight gain
 - Emotional
 - Feelings of shame and depression before or after binging
 - Social
 - Eating in private to avoid embarrassment or more interested in food than social gatherings
- Psychology Today, 2008

What Causes It?

- Strong emotions, stress, or trauma
- Levels of dopamine are low in the rewards center of the person's brain
- Low dopamine means less of a reward, so to counteract this he or she will eat more
- Chicken or egg debate: overeating because of a non-responsive dopamine system or is it a non-responsive dopamine system because it was over-stimulated by so much food

- Brownell & Liebman , 2012

The Biology Behind It

- Neural activity similar to that of a drug addict
- Regions of self control were less active while eating (lateral orbitofrontal cortex)
- Areas of the brain that light up in an fMRI when a person suffering is shown pictures of food
 - Amygdala
 - Anterior Cingulate Cortex
 - Medial Orbitofrontal Cortex

Szalavitz, 2011



The Yale Food Addiction Scale

- Yale graduate student Ashley Gearhardt
 - First published in 2009
- Sugary and fatty foods are “hyper-palatable”
- Asks questions including how eating negatively affects daily life and overall well-being
- Used fMRI to view women’s brains while viewing and tasting chocolate milkshakes

How Can It Be Treated?

- Food Addicts Anonymous
- Overeaters Anonymous
- Based on the 12 step program of Alcoholics Anonymous
- Know triggers and set up the environment so triggers aren't around
 - Abstain from "addictive" foods, not food in general



❧ The 12 Steps of OA ❧

1. We admit that we are powerless over food - that our lives have become unmanageable.
2. We have come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity.
3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. We admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. We are entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. We humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to compulsive overeaters and to practise these principles in all our affairs.



<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-1301152/Overeaters-anonymous-From-yummy-mummies-civil-servants-thing-common--eating-addiction.html>

Real Life Stories of Overeating

- Freaky Eaters on TLC
- Describe the food as "crack" or as a replacement for love and affection
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZOqh3nqyS0&feature=rclist&playnext=1&list=PL4F89941DE91A46D1>

Can We Consider This an Addiction?

- Not listed in the DSM IV specifically
 - Impulse Control Disorder
 - Could be listed in DSM V as Compulsive Overeating
- Behavior is excessive
- Negative health consequences
- Isolation from society may occur to hide behavior
- Physiological and neurological evidence

Alternative Explanations

- Could be result of overwhelming stress or emotions
- Intense cravings don't necessarily mean an addiction
- Can't abstain from food completely
 - No withdrawal symptoms
- May eat to fill a void such as loneliness
 - If the divorces or traumatic events hadn't happened, would there still be an addiction?

Addiction or Not?

- After looking at the research, I believe it can be considered an addiction
- fMRI similar to those of drug addicts and alcoholics
- Excessive activity, loss of control
- Affects social and emotional well-being
- Brings pleasure to the person

References

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