

## Comfort eating... a learned response?

Countless people with a weight issue readily confess to 'comfort eating' when they get stressed. This is not a startling revelation, but it is a fact. They might justify it by saying "When I feel sad, I comfort eat. When I feel lonely, I comfort eat. When I feel worried, I comfort eat. I've been comfort eating for so long, I don't even realise I'm doing it."

The real problem is 'comfort eating' doesn't actually solve the problem. It may momentarily distract from feelings of sadness, loneliness, vulnerability, or worry, but it doesn't improve the situation in the slightest. When it comes to weight loss, one of the most insidious, underhanded and downright stupid attempts by the unconscious mind to keep you safe is comfort eating! If you want proof that your own autonomic nervous system is devoid of intelligence, you'll find it here!

Comfort eating is, quite simply, a compulsive behaviour disorder. Picture this... you realise, to your absolute horror, you have unexpectedly gained weight. Life seems to be a little out of control and so does your ever-increasing waistline. You decide you need to take charge! Lose some weight and get back in control of your health, and your life. You decide to go on a diet. You hate dieting, but it's a better alternative to spending the rest of your life fat!

Terrific! What do you do? Obviously, you do what everybody else does. Start by eating healthier, getting more exercise and raising your metabolism. You become so determined to lose weight that nothing will prevent you from your goal... right? Wrong!

You follow the latest diet fad meticulously. You're prepared. You've planned everything. You might be doing really well then mysteriously, for reasons that seem to totally defy logic, you find yourself experiencing something rather unexplainable... cravings! 'I'd really love something yummy...'

Whatever the 'something' might be is irrelevant... chocolate cake, pizza, alcohol... it doesn't matter, as long as it is a distraction or a reward! 'No, no, I shouldn't... I'm on a diet!' you think to yourself. Then a sinister little voice inside your head whispers quietly in your ear... 'Oh, go on. Just a little bit won't hurt. You know you want it.'

You resist the temptation, but that subtle little whisper gets louder and louder. You resist even more, but the voice inside your head becomes even more insistent. More demanding! You suddenly have a stream of thoughts running through your mind. They can range from a subtle cajoling... 'You have done so wonderfully; you deserve a reward...' to seriously undermining... 'You know you'll fail, you're hopeless, what were you thinking. There's no point to going on a diet. What were you thinking? You'll never lose weight! Go on, you deserve a reward! Eat it - NOW! Why deprive yourself of something you love? Stop fighting...you know you can't live without it! Eat it! Just do it...'

The more you resist, the louder it gets! Your resolve fades... 'Oh, I suppose just one won't hurt... will it?' you reason. The tasty little morsel becomes irresistible. Without any further thought, you give into the temptation and have 'just a little bit'. Before you know it, you've

eaten everything in sight and are seriously contemplating getting home delivery of anything that will satisfy the outrageous demands of your inner demon!

The problem is that it will never be satisfied! It only ever wants... MORE!

After you've had your food fix, another interesting thing happens... you suddenly start to feel guilty! Maybe I'm being dramatic, but when it's all said and done, comfort eating is a *compulsion* to eat things that you know you would be better off not eating. You seem powerless to prevent the cravings and only end up berating yourself.

Allow me to explain the dynamics of comfort eating, with a story. Now, remember your unconscious mind controls the physical body and its job, above all else, is to protect your body. If it senses you are not safe in any way, it will come charging to your rescue. We are pre-programmed as pack animals. Being connected to the pack - be it physically or emotionally - is of paramount importance. The big thing to remember is... your unconscious mind works by *association*!

Ok, the story... imagine the main character is a little girl. It's her birthday, she's just turned five. There's a wonderful party and she feels elated. All her friends are there. Mummy and Daddy are there. Grandma and Granddad, all the aunts and uncles. Everyone she knows and loves is there. She gets some fantastic birthday presents, she eats yummy birthday cake, lots of sweets and lollies, she drinks fizzy drinks, and even goes on a pony ride!

It's the happiest day of her life. A day she'll never forget. She feels so incredibly loved, valued, appreciated, adored. She feels like she is *safe in the middle of the pack*. She's the centre of every one's attention, and simply loves feeling loved!

Life moves on for our little girl. In her forties the happy times are a distant memory. The pressures of life are taking a toll. There are bills to pay, hungry mouths to feed, careers to nurture, and a husband she inexplicably seems to have fallen out of love with. She's feeling stressed. She doesn't understand why, but she seems to be gaining weight.

Then, the straw that breaks the camel's back! She's *worried* something bad could happen... maybe there is a risk her marriage could fail. Possibly her parents become ill. There's a financial downturn and she is *worried* she may lose her job. Her financial security is at risk. Whatever form the 'straw' takes, it always involves fear of loss! Loss of security, loss of comfort, loss of connection. She is *worried*!

Meanwhile her unconscious mind is monitoring everything. It senses her feelings of worry and knows it's time to step up and do its job. It comes charging to her rescue. As quick as a flash it scans through her memory banks looking for something, anything, it doesn't matter what it is, as long as it will make her feel *safe, secure, comfortable and like she belongs... safe in the middle of the pack!*

It's searching for the time when she felt the most safe, secure, comfortable and like she belonged; the most 'emotionally connected'!... a point she felt safest - in the middle of the pack - it stumbles across the *memory* of her fifth birthday!

Her unconscious mind, like yours, works by association. It associates everything it could detect on that day with her five physical and her two non-physical senses with feeling safe! If

she's worried... she's not safe! It must save her from whatever's responsible for making her feel unsafe. It could be a hungry lion!

It comes to her rescue by creating... cravings! It's like her unconscious mind says... 'Here, quick, eat this piece of chocolate cake, that'll make you feel safe. It worked when you were five, it'll work now!' Before she knows it, she's eaten the whole thing. The problem is though, it doesn't actually make her feel any better.

'Well, that didn't work!' her unconscious mind thinks. 'Here... have some sweets and lollies. It worked when you were five, it'll work now!' She finds herself compelled to eat as many sweets and lollies as she can lay her hands on. Again, this doesn't solve the problem. She still feels this incredible sense of worry... but now she also feels guilty for her lack of self-control.

'Hmmm...' her unconscious mind thinks. 'I know! Fizzy drink! That'll solve the problem!' Alas... it does not!

'OMG' thinks her autonomic nervous system. 'That didn't work. Quick, race out and buy yourself a birthday present. It worked when you were five, it'll work now!' She suddenly, inexplicably, feels compelled to go on a shopping spree. She buys all manner of things she really doesn't need, in order to satisfy the demands of her unconscious mind. Unwittingly, she's become a shopaholic! But... buying herself a present doesn't work either. She still feels worried!

Her autonomic nervous system is thinking 'What the hell!... This is becoming a little tedious.' Time to bring in the big guns... when all else fails, her autonomic nervous system will 'compel' her to go on... a freaking pony ride! It worked when she was five, it'll work now. But this doesn't achieve the unconscious mind's objective of making her feel safe either. Nothing will work until the real problem is identified and effectively addressed. She must deal with whatever it is that is causing her to feel worried.

Cause and effect. The *effect* is the comfort eating - a compulsive behaviour disorder. The *cause* is... the worry! She could spend the rest of her life in therapy in an attempt to overcome her compulsions, whatever they may be, or she could simply deal with the cause of the worry. I know what will give a better, faster result... and it ain't spending twenty-seven years in therapy!

Without her even realising it, her unconscious mind is coming to her rescue. She was born pre-programmed with a series of 'survival programs'. As crazy as it sounds, her unconscious mind is reacting as though she is vulnerable to a hungry lion! Addictions of any kind, food, alcohol, drugs - even shopping addictions - are all the result of feeling disconnected from the safety of the pack. At the heart of the problem is a belonging and safety issue. The 'addict' doesn't feel like they are welcomed or are accepted by the people that matter to them.

The unconscious mind is trying to save us from a problem that doesn't really exist... being eaten by a hungry lion.