



Michelle P. Maidenberg
Ph.D., MPH, LCSW-R, CGP
Being Your Best Self

HEALTH

Why Do You Overeat?

Knowing why is the start to making the lifelong changes you truly want.

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Knowing why we overeat can direct us to ultimately change our overeating behavior. Overeating is habitual and behavioral which is known to be directly impacted by our thoughts and feelings. Understanding why we overeat and how our thoughts and feelings can thwart or positively contribute to our self-belief, motivation, and commitment to the process can lead to lifelong sustained changes.

The Why and How of Making Real Changes

Our propensity, unfortunately, is to deny, avoid or disregard our uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. There can be great discomfort sitting with a craving or urge or facing that we have the impulse to eat much more than we wanted or intended to. When change requires an inquiry and discovery of our thoughts and feelings, the “why” and “how” is the start of the journey. Barriers such as reluctance, fear and/or hopelessness need to be unearthed, processed and worked on if we are looking to achieve long-term changes.

If it were so easy, we would all have effective behavioral change nailed down. As imperfect human beings, we all relate to having personal challenges that make behavioral change feel arduous, disappointing, frustrating, and at times, downright impossible. It’s the very behaviors we can identify as having a hard time working on, committing to and sticking with.

We fall into a cycle of making change, and then periodically or for the long haul, slipping back into old patterns of behavior which are all too familiar and unnerving. This cycle typically trails along with deep personal regret, shame and disappointment. Overeating most definitely fits into the category of behaviors that prove challenging for us.

Why Do We Overeat?

So let’s tackle the question of why we overeat. In his informative [TED talk](#) on simple ways to break a bad habit, neuroscientist and fellow *Psychology Today* blogger Judson Brewer explains that overeating is learned and becomes a habit. The nuance behind it is that we are triggered (see the enticing food), engage in eating behavior, and then get immediately rewarded by the behavior (experience pleasure because it tastes so incredibly good which satiates our appetite, and we feel better emotionally because it helps to meet an emotional need).

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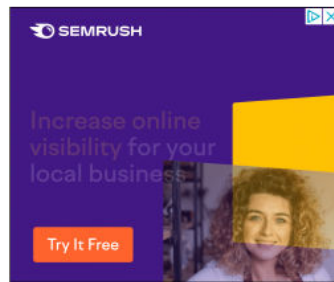
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We commit to memory the reward process and continually chase that pleasure (the first delicious bite, the immediate joyfulness, etc.). This is why it is so difficult to change the behavior — because it's what we have learned, what's become engrained in our memory and the associations we then naturally make when we eat.

To expand on the above, overeating might have been learned and utilized as a coping mechanism to deal with emotions (i.e., emotional eating). It could have been the way we learned to cope with sadness, disappointment, frustration, joy, or some other emotion. It serves as a good distraction and can be an effective, yet maladaptive way to keep emotions at bay.

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Food and eating are also part of the fabric in our society and can be a sign of status. It's part of the way we celebrate holidays, religious celebrations and rituals, birthday parties, and special occasions. The inclusion of food is a major part of the way we socialize in general.

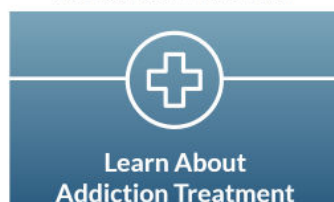
Whether we are going to a Super Bowl party, a 4th of July BBQ or our friend's milestone birthday party, food is usually plentiful. It's what we arrange for and what we expect to have available to us.

Second, **snacking can be addictive**. Because snacking on something sweet, salty, or crunchy is pleasurable, it stimulates the brain's reward centers through the neurotransmitter dopamine, exactly like other addictive drugs, and releases the body's own opioids in the brain, sending signals that it needs more.

Studies have proven that certain foods can be addictive. That is why people tend to binge on potato chips, chocolate, or cupcakes rather than on carrot sticks and apple slices. Brain imaging using PET scans showed that high sugar and high fat foods work just like drugs such as heroin, opium, or morphine. People also develop a tolerance of sugar; they will need more and more to be satisfied.

Research shows that when given a choice, rats were more attracted to sweetened water than to cocaine or heroin.[1] In order to understand biochemistry, when a person consumes glucose, a type of sugar, it spikes the blood sugar and creates a high insulin reaction. High insulin then blocks leptin, the appetite hormone, so our brain does not get the "I'm full" signal and instead thinks that we're starving. Our pleasure-based reward center becomes activated, which drives us to consume more sugar. This explains why individuals may have difficulty controlling the consumption of foods high in sugar when they are continuously exposed to foods containing sugar.

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Lastly, our minds trip us up. Because food can be so incredibly satisfying and addicting, we gain mastery over rationalizing our behavior which keeps us enrolled in this cycle. From speaking to adults and children, I came up with 40 rationalizations for why individuals justify their overeating. They include “watching what I eat is too hard,” “it’s low-fat/fat-free,” “I will make up for it later,” “I’ll burn it off later,” “I don’t usually eat this,” “it’s free,” “everyone else is eating it,” “I am anxious/tired/sad/upset/bored,” “I will just eat these few nibbles,” “it’s a special occasion,” “I’m treating myself,” “I can start eating more healthfully again tomorrow,” “I really want it,” “no one will know,” “I’ll end up eating it eventually,” “healthy food doesn’t taste as good,” and “it’s freshly baked/cooked.” I expect these rationalizations and others sound all too familiar, for good reason, because we all utilize them.

Understanding the Psychological and Emotional Factors

So now that we can say that we know the main reasons why we overeat, why is it still so fundamentally difficult for us to change our behavior? As I started out saying, this is a journey. A quick fix, like just focusing on diet and exercise, as we previously were led to believe would do the trick, we now know, falls short. The psychological and emotional factors that directly create and impact our barriers and keep us in this perpetual cycle need to be addressed as well.

For real incremental sustaining change to occur, we need to be open to discovering, processing and working through these barriers. My book, [Free Your Child From Overeating: 53 Mind-Body Strategies For Lifelong Health](#), uses psychological treatments such as Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and Mindfulness to tackle the psychological and emotional barriers that keep us stuck. Although it is geared toward parents and practitioners, I use the strategies widely with adults, teens, and adolescents.

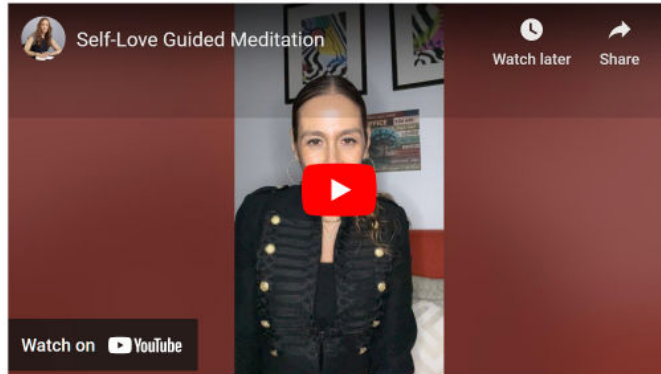
The four step model, utilizing the 4P’s — *predict, plan, put into action, and practice* — emphasizes making change in a lasting way. It’s predicated on better understanding how your mind works, connecting with your fundamental values, doing a thorough assessment of your thinking and behavior, and implementing effective strategies to restructure and work toward a growth mindset. Each of the 4P’s has systematic strategies that reinforce insight and behavior change.

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We are constantly implementing strategies in regard to our health and wellness that help in the short-term but do not lead to sustaining changes. It’s what feels like an endless cycle of getting on and off the roller coaster. You have spent enough money, time, and energy, with no real results. Understanding the emotional and psychological barriers is the missing link. Now is the time to live the life you are proud of and which truly empowers you.

Here is a "Self-Love Guided Meditation" that I led.



References

[1] Lenoir, M., Serre, F., Cantin, L., and Ahmed, S.H. (2007). "Intense Sweetness Surpasses Cocaine Reward." *PLOS ONE*, 2(8), e698.

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About the Author



Michelle P. Maidenberg, Ph.D., MPH, LCSW-R, CGP

maintains a private practice in Harrison, NY. She is an adjunct graduate professor of Mindfulness Practice at New York University and the president and clinical director of the Thru My Eyes Foundation. My new book is *ACE Your Life: Unleash Your Best Self and Live the Life You Want*.

Online: michellemaidenberg.com, [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#)

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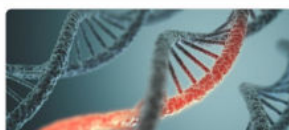
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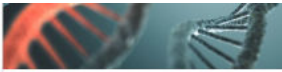




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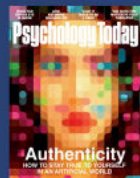
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