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Overcoming Your Obsession with Food and Dieting
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With the constant bombardment of idealized images of beauty in media, it is no surprise that there is an ever-increasing obsession with food and dieting in today's culture. Images of beauty in the media convey the message that those who are slimmer or more fit, for example, are also wealthier, healthier, and happier. Influenced by such pressures to obtain the ideal body, initial attempts to lose weight can, for some individuals, transform into an obsession that eventually spirals out of control. Strategies to lose weight may eventually escalate to extreme measures such as excessive food restriction, reliance on diuretics, dieting pills, laxatives, bingeing, and/or purging. These are symptoms associated with eating conditions known as Anorexia, Bulimia Nervosa or Binge Eating Disorder.

While such weight management strategies are intended to help you feel better about your body, they ultimately result in a loss of self-esteem and confidence. You may experience shame resulting from your attempts to keep your weight control behaviors, such as bingeing or purging, a secret from others. Even worse, your obsession with your body size may be dominating your thoughts and feelings to such a point that other goals and aspirations take second place. The longer you struggle to gain control over your body, the less control you feel over other areas of your life. The long-term consequences of using such weight control strategies can be severe, ranging from depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal to physical consequences such as lethargy, cardiac irregularities, menstrual dysfunction, hair loss and in some cases, even death.

So what steps are necessary to help you overcome your obsession with food and dieting? It is important to understand that excessive food restriction, while temporarily effective for weight loss, actually contributes to greater weight gain in the long run. According to set-point theory, an individual's metabolism will adjust itself to maintain a weight at which it is comfortable. When you go below your set-point weight, your body's natural defense mechanisms against starvation kick in. Your metabolism will decrease and your body will burn fewer calories to maintain optimal health. Symptoms, such as increased obsessional thinking about food, increased duration and intensity of hunger are the body's efforts to resist significant deviation from the set-point. It is important, therefore, to understand that your efforts to lose weight may actually be working against you and your desired goal. Developing an understanding of normal, healthy eating will be important to provide you with a guideline to effective weight loss and maintenance of health.

It is important to understand and challenge maladaptive beliefs and behavioral cycles that may be contributing to your dieting obsession. For example, beliefs such as "If I start eating, I will never be able to stop" or "If I lose weight, all my problems will be solved" often fuel and perpetuate the inner battle with food and dieting. Uncovering faulty

beliefs about yourself and factors that trigger binge/purge episodes, for example, can be identified through detailed recording of events, thoughts, and feelings that precede such episodes. Through this process, you may discover that daily upsets such as a disagreement with your boss or a partner triggers emotional frustration and accompanying thoughts of hopelessness about yourself and others. The binge/purge cycle may be used to escape the emotional turmoil in your daily life which only leads to greater self-doubt and self-loathing. Part of recovery will, therefore, involve learning to develop new ways of thinking and coping with stress without using bingeing as an escape from emotions.

Recovering from an eating disorder can take time and in most cases, a great deal of support from others. Often, recovery is best facilitated with the guidance of a mental health professional, including a psychologist or counselor who specializes in eating disorders. A professional can guide you through the process of understanding beliefs, thoughts and feelings that trigger your fear of weight gain and subsequent weight control strategies. A professional can help you develop adaptive coping strategies that will be enhancing to your self-esteem and heighten your sense of control in life. Ultimately, the decision to change is yours.

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