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Member Viewpoint: The Sadness of Saying "Enough"

Elyse Resch, MS, RD, FADA, is a nutrition therapist and co-author of "Intuitive Eating" (St. Martin's Press, 1995, 2003). The following commentary and case presentation describe the application of the Intuitive Eating model to the treatment of an overweight teenage male. The Forum welcomes readers' comments and responses to this thoughtful piece.



What do you do when a patient tells you that he/she is not eating emotionally, yet your intuition suggests that this can't be true? You've already established that the patient does not have binge eating disorder or bulimia nervosa, but his/her food intake still is far beyond normal. You may begin by exploring a variety of emotions that might trigger overeating, only to be met with a vehement denial of emotional eating. This situation has happened frequently in my office, but there was one young man whom I treated a few years ago who exemplified this denial to a tee.

Bobby had always been larger than his classmates and now, as a sophomore in high school, was determined to normalize his weight. He claimed that he wanted to be healthier, but I well knew that his unstated motive was to attract the girls in his class and start dating! I had actually worked with Bobby for a short time when he was 8 or 9, but at that time, he wasn't really interested in counseling. In fact, he didn't think that he had a problem — it was his mother's issue that brought them to my office. When he was referred to me again at 15, he was eager to make changes, but was reticent to acknowledge that there was anything emotional going on besides the fact that he really liked food and lots of it!

Whenever we talked about emotional eating, he said, "NO, NO, NO — I never go to food when I'm upset. In fact, when I'm upset, I have no appetite and barely want to eat." I have heard this comment from numerous patients who don't fit into the standard emotional eating category. They report eating large volumes of food whenever they sit down to eat and have a

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very difficult time honoring their fullness signals. But, they never report running to food when they're upset, and they deny emotional eating. They all simply state that they just love to eat.

So, over a number of months, Bobby and I went round and round about the volume of his intake while I was teaching him about Intuitive Eating. In learning this philosophy, I taught him that his body was born with all the internal wisdom that he would need to guide his eating. He was asked to observe his signals of hunger, fullness, food preference, and how he felt physically in response to eating. I also gently suggested that he notice if he could detect any emotional triggers for eating. But, unfortunately, we were getting nowhere until one day when he was able to acknowledge that "maybe he wasn't really so physically hungry for all the food that he was eating, but it just tasted so good, and he didn't want to stop."

This was a breakthrough in the treatment. I asked him a very pointed question at that point, which was, "If you're no longer hungry, but you go on eating, does your body need any more food?" He had no other choice but to answer "no" since he had begun to appreciate the concept of connecting eating with hunger and fullness. My next question was, "Well, if your body doesn't need any more food, then there must be some other need that this extra food is filling — right?" Bingo — again, he had no other retort than "must be!" Finally, he was able to acknowledge that he was, in fact, eating emotionally because he was eating beyond his physical needs. This conversation opened the door for him to look at all of the possible reasons that he might be overeating.

Bobby's mother had restricted his food choices for most of his life. He realized that he had often overeaten out of his frustration and anger that he couldn't have some of the foods that his friends were allowed to eat. When he was finally given the freedom to eat whatever he wanted without restriction, he continued to overeat in order to make up for all of his past food deprivation. When I helped him to imagine what it might feel like to stop eating when he was comfortably full, he realized that it would make him feel sad to set that limit and stop eating. The food tasted great, and the freedom to eat as much as he wanted tasted even greater. As we explored his feelings, and I reminded him that feelings are connected to his emotional life, he started to see that he had a choice. He could either continue to eat beyond fullness and protect himself from the sadness that emerged if he stopped eating, or he could stop eating and feel the sadness — which he discovered only lasted for a few moments. He realized, on trade-off, that if he kept overeating, he would continue to feel the painful feelings that he was experiencing of being different than his friends and that this pain was far greater than the more minimal pain of setting limits to eat based on fullness.

I helped him find the language to comfort this pain. This included reassuring himself that he could eat whatever he wanted when he got hungry again and that the food would taste even better with this renewed hunger. He also remembered to tell himself that the sadness of ending his meal before becoming overfull would only last a few moments and that he was capable of tolerating this feeling. In fact, he had been tolerating the feelings of low self-esteem about his weight and his fears of not fitting in for many years. These feelings were far more intense than the feelings that emerged when he stopped eating.

As Bobby practiced this new skill, it was a revelation for him to experience tolerating his feelings. In fact, it was a revelation for him to even acknowledge that he did have difficult feelings and that he had been covering them for most of his life by eating beyond fullness. With this new mastery, his self-esteem grew, and he became eager to take better care of himself. He had never been very active, even rebelling against activity when his mother pushed him in this area.

However, now, he wanted to include movement in his life in a number of different arenas. As time progressed, Bobby became quite adept at becoming an Intuitive Eater. He learned to honor his fullness, tolerate his difficult feelings, and take joy and pride in feeling better physically. And, as an aside, he ended up normalizing his weight, and feeling very competent in the world of eating. He stays in touch with me, has just finished his first year of college, and says that this experience has changed his life.

We are so often presented with patients who have serious eating disorders, which sometimes emerge as a result of traumatic life experiences. But, I believe that we must also be open to understanding the more nuanced feelings that arise in patients who don't have a diagnosable eating disorder and who aren't able to recognize their emotional eating, let alone recognize that they even have feelings that could be associated with eating.

We can help these patients understand that eating beyond physiological hunger and fullness indicates that there may be another need that is being fulfilled by their overeating. Even if this need is simply to protect themselves from the sadness

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that emerges when they have to stop a pleasurable experience, we can help them to understand this behavior and to be motivated to explore these feelings.

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