

Lesson #8: Emotional Overeating

Contents:

Training Hunger Responses

There are three basic reasons why an individual eats: true hunger (physiological – body signal); situational (in response to a place, person, or event); or, emotional (in response to a feeling). It has been well demonstrated that the person with a weight problem overeats (also sometimes called maladaptive or inappropriate eating) more in response to external or emotional cues, rather than to internal, normal physiological cues. That means that most overeating takes place when there is no true hunger present.

In several of our other handouts we have described methods of dealing with situational (external cue) eating. Nevertheless, probably the most difficult problem for the overweight person to deal with is eating triggered by various feelings. The purpose of this publication is to describe the manner in which emotions lead us to overeat and how we can best learn to deal with this phenomenon. A thorough study and application of the techniques we will describe are therefore an important component of the overall effort of the person who seriously wishes to learn to control his or her inappropriate eating habits.

It's a very powerful cue to eat

Emotional cues for eating are, no doubt, among the most compelling forces that result in maladapted

eating behavior. All of us can possibly recall when a feeling of anger, frustration, loneliness or boredom triggered an eating episode. Now, it's true that thin people eat in response to emotions, too, but turning to food in times of stress can wreak havoc on the efforts of a person who has a weight problem.

It may often begin with a minor food ingestion. Yet, it has a tendency to feed upon itself (no pun intended) and frequently results in a major eating spree. Suppose something in your environment touches off a strong feeling. Because of your previous method of coping with this emotion, you turn to a small amount of food. Even if the food temporarily softens the intensity of the feeling, if you've got a weight problem, another emotion, guilt, is set off by the food ingestion. This guilt feeling may be as strong, or even stronger, than the original emotion you tried to allay by eating. This guilt inevitably leads to further eating of larger and larger quantities. You feel worse, you eat more, feel worse, eat even more, etc., until you're so miserable you can't eat any more – or, there is nothing left to eat. Once this vicious cycle begins, it is very difficult to stop.

The first step in gaining control over emotional eating cues is to increase your awareness of whether your appetite for food at any

particular moment is being caused by *psychological* (false hunger) or *physiological* (true hunger) signals. You should develop the habit of asking yourself

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before each food ingestion: "Am I really hungry?" If the answer is yes, it is probably safe to begin eating. If the answer is no, however, the chances are that you are feeling the impulse to eat in response to an

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emotional arousal. So, we must first define and trace its origins. Armed with such knowledge, we can then design a strategy to deal with the emotion by means other than eating.

Emotion: a state of arousal

When we feel an emotion we are in a state that departs from our usual sense of inward mental balance. Emotions can either be *positive* (e.g. happiness and joy) or *negative* (e.g. depression and anger). In either case it is an intensified feeling which is a normal part of living. A lack of emotional experiences would make for a very boring and dull life. Thus, the emotional experience is not of itself bad or undesirable, but it is the way that we cope with this feeling that gets us into difficulty, especially when our primary coping method is to turn to food.

Notwithstanding, before we can learn new ways of coping with our emotional states, we must know where they originate. The principal message we want to convey to you is: *There is always a thought that precedes a specific emotion that you become aware of* – or to state it in simpler terms – *thoughts lead to feelings!*

Therefore, it becomes necessary that we trace backwards, and determine what thoughts we had prior to any emotional state. For instance, the Christmas holidays can result in one person feeling depressed while another one becomes elated. Why is there such a

marked difference to a similar set of circumstances? It is due to the thoughts that are associated with the event. For example, in the first instance the holidays may revive some painful memories of a loved one who has died. Thoughts such as these can lead the person to feel depressed and unhappy about the loss of a close friend or relative. In the second instance, the holidays may awaken memories of happy past experiences during this season, and such a person is likely to have feelings of gaiety and delight. It should become

quite apparent to you that the way you interpret an event, or how you choose to think about it, is fundamentally what determines how you are going to feel about it. The cardinal rule, then, is that to control your emotions (and resultant emotional eating), you must learn to control your thoughts!

Your own private monologue

Since interpretation of a situation is the critical factor that determines the resulting emotion, a brief look at how the human mind interprets a particular predicament is helpful. We do it by a process of what we will call self-talk. Such self-talk can be either encouraging or self-defeating. *Negative or inappropriate self-talk is the main culprit that leads to negative feelings.* The next step in this mental arousal is to make a choice of coping with the emotion. If the only behavior in your coping bag of tricks is eating, such an emotion will inevitably lead to this maladaptive response.

The important point is that such self-talk is learned. How you learn it depends on many variables: your cultural background; your ethnic background; whether you are male or female; how your parents and people you interact with respond to a similar situation, etc. We are not born with genes that determine how we interpret events that go on about us in particular ways by the kind of self-talk we engage in. It is an axiom of behavioral psychology that *anything that is learned can be unlearned* – or, can be *re-learned* differently. Thus, to learn self-control over our emotions, we must houseclean and learn new ways of replacing negative monologues with more appropriate ones. Your mind might be compared to a computer. The input (event) has to be processed (interpreted) before an output (behavior) results.

One might use the analogy of programs that have been stored in a computer in delineating the interpretation (self-talk) process. The programs stored in your brain consist of your expectations, goals, belief system, bank of memories and your self-image. The input can sometimes be provided very surreptitiously. It need not always even be verbal.

A “program” in operation

Consider the following series of events to illustrate how such processing takes place. (This is an actual experiment we ask patients to conduct if they doubt the powerful effects that self-talk can have on the behavior of a person).

You have just lost 40 pounds. You still need to lose another 20 pounds. Even so, you have just bought a new smaller outfit. It is



the first day you wear it at your place of employment. Your boss sees you in it. He doesn't say anything. Just gives you a long glance, mumbles "Hummm," shakes his head, and walks away. That was the input.

Now comes the self-talk, based on your program (self-image, memory bank, value system, goals, etc.):

"Why did he give me that look? He must disapprove. I really shouldn't have bought this outfit until I had lost more weight. I still look fat (self-image). It's probably too tight for my legs. My friends have always remarked that I have a pretty face, but that my legs are too large (memory bank). I should look more like the person who modeled the outfit for me (expectations, goals). It looked better on him/her. People like myself can just never wear outfits like that (value system). I wonder if my boss is laughing at me? Am I making a fool of myself? I must really look ridiculous."

Chances are very strong that you'll take the next opportunity to look at yourself in a full length mirror – from all sides – as you turn around several times to study your reflected image.

More self-talk: *"The outfit is too long. No, it's too short. It's really too tight around the middle. No, it's too loose. Hangs like a bag on me – no shape at all. Maybe the color isn't right. I should have gotten a darker shade. I wish I hadn't told the sales person about how fat I used to be. I'm too embarrassed to take it back."*

By the time you arrive home that evening you are feeling very unhappy and frustrated. You don't really like that outfit any more. It was a mistake to buy it. You could have spent the money on something more useful. You feel pretty guilty about making such a stupid purchase.

Emotion: frustration, depression, guilt, anger about wasting the money, fear about disapproval from your boss, on whom you've been trying to make a good impression.

Behavior: You are all alone in the house. There is some ice cream left in the refrigerator. You decide to have just half a cup. Maybe, it will make you feel better. Sure tasted good! So, you have some more, while you're trying to figure out what you can do with that outfit. Before you know it, you've eaten the whole quart.

Sound familiar? And it all happened without a single word having been spoken. The only input was a glance and shake of the head. It's the negative self-talk that led to the negative emotion and, ultimately, to the maladaptive emotional eating episode.

Beliefs are learned

A fundamental component of the programs stored in your computer (brain) is the system of beliefs you

have developed (learned). Since your personal programs determine how you will handle the input (e.g., an event), and since these programs are responsible for the final output (e.g., improper eating behavior), it becomes important to examine your **belief system**. If you're going to learn to replace self-destructive monologues with appropriate self-talk (so that you can get in control of your emotions) you will need to know how your beliefs trigger such harmful self-talk. That means that we must first define the word "belief."

Your beliefs are not necessarily factual. If they were facts there would be no need for an act of faith on your part. Beliefs consist of tenets or convictions that you hold concerning certain ideas or realities. To put it in simpler words, beliefs make up the perspectives you have about the world that surrounds you. They are ideas to which you firmly subscribe. They may embody not only your concepts of certain facts, but also your concepts of how things ought to be.

Furthermore, they embrace your self-concept as you perceive yourself to be, and also as you think you ought (would like) to be. Your self-image (how you see yourself now, and how you would like to see yourself in the future) is incorporated in what you believe about events, other persons and your own person. These beliefs are accumulated throughout your lifetime. They are influenced by your cultural background and the people that associate with you. Can you see the similarity to the development of certain habit patterns? Both beliefs and habits are affected by similar elements. In

other words, both of them are LEARNED!

It's time to "question" your beliefs

Harmful habits can be unlearned and new ones can be developed to take their place. So it is with your beliefs. You were not born with them (just as you were not born with your habit patterns). Therefore, it is possible to change harmful beliefs to more productive ones. We are not recommending that you completely overhaul all your thinking and beliefs. We merely propose that you identify those beliefs that are detrimental to you, and replace them with beliefs that are constructive and beneficial to your emotional well-being. By questioning the validity of some of your injurious assumptions you will free yourself from their restrictive influence. Once you realize the important role your beliefs play in determining your emotions (how you feel), you are more likely to accept new information and adopt healthier attitudes about yourself and others. When you have accomplished this first important step, you will be well on the road towards getting in control of your emotions as well as your behavior.

Replacing self-talk with self-questioning

Let us repeat the basic premise for the sake of emphasis. Emotions (including those that lead to overeating) do not just happen magically, out of the clear sky. They are produced by your self-talk (beliefs and interpretations based on those beliefs). Consequently, you can ultimately control your feelings if you choose (control) your self-talk wisely. Harmful beliefs have

also been called irrational ideas or by a more descriptive term that we prefer, namely, *crooked thinking!*

In order to begin using appropriate self-talk you must first identify the irrational beliefs that cause inappropriate, self-destructive monologues, and are the basis of the emotional disturbances that lead you to eat when you're not really hungry. Obviously, crooked thoughts will vary with the individual. Nevertheless, to help you identify them when they occur, there are several categories of irrational thinking that we list for you below. Recognizing these thoughts when they occur is the initial step in coping with your injurious emotional states. The next step is to immediately REPHRASE the thought and correct the unhealthy self-talk.

Types of "crooked thinking"

1. *Certain things that I do are terrible, and I must be punished for having done them.*
2. *It is much easier to avoid something that is difficult for me, and I am not capable of assuming responsibility for my own behavior.*
3. *I must always be perfectly competent, and if I don't achieve 100% of what I set out to do, I am a failure.*
4. *I must be able to exert perfect control over everything that happens, and I cannot enjoy my life without such constant control.*
5. *I have no control over my emotions or feelings, and, therefore, am not responsible for my resultant behavior.*
6. *Happiness is a passive state of mind, and I am not responsible if my*

surroundings cause me to feel unhappy.

7. *I have always reacted negatively to a certain set of circumstances, and I can never change.*
8. *I must be loved by everyone all of the time, and if what I do displeases others, I cannot change the way they feel about me.*
9. *I need an outside force greater than myself to correct my compulsive behavior, and cannot assume responsibility for taking corrective action.*
10. *It's just awful when things don't go the way I want them to go, and I can only feel sorry for myself under such circumstances.*
11. *My misery is caused by other people and events, and it's just horrible when things aren't the way I'd like them to be.*
12. *When something upsetting happens to me that I cannot cope with, I am justified in feeling terrible about it, and I cannot be expected to act rationally under such circumstances.*

Traits versus behavior

Notice that all these crooked thoughts have a common thread running through them. They tend to emphasize personality traits or defects rather than behaviors. This implies a fatalistic attitude. After all, deep-seated personal inadequacies are not amenable to change. On the other hand, we have already shown you that how you act (behavior) is subject to alteration or modification. Self-talk such as: "Things I do are terrible." "I am a failure." "I have no control over my feelings." "I can never change." "My misery is caused by other people." "I cannot be expected to

act rationally.” – these statements have an inexorable predestination and finality about them. They are also often used as an explanation and excuse for continuing to engage in maladaptive eating behavior. The self-talk must be shifted to the behavior itself (how you acted, not why you acted that way). In doing so, it must be realistic and you must avoid pessimistic and punitive language. Negative self-talk leads to negative feelings of guilt, anger, frustration and depression.

Evaluate the crooked thought

Once the crooked thinking has been identified, the next step is to evaluate its *reasonableness*. If the self-talk has emphasized a personal inadequacy (trait), then shift the focus on the deficiency of the actual behavior. For instance, when you hit a weight plateau, the self-talk might go something like this: “I haven’t lost any weight the last two weeks. It’s just not fair. Most of my friends can eat as they please, and here I am starving myself, have given up all my favorite foods, and I’ve got nothing to show for it. No matter how hard I try, I’ll never lose any weight. I just feel so depressed. I might as well eat and enjoy myself. At least, I will feel better. I just can’t go on suffering like this without any results. I’ve just resigned myself to the fact that I was born to be fat, and I’m always going to be fat. I’ll die fat! Whatever it takes, I just don’t have it.”

Harmful beliefs have also been called irrational ideas or crooked thinking!

When you examine this for reasonableness, it becomes quite apparent that you are catastrophizing (no matter how hard I try, I’ll never lose any weight – I’ll die fat). The emphasis in this self-talk illustration has also been on personality traits (whatever it takes, I just don’t have it).

Furthermore, you have accentuated pounds lost during a two week period. How long did it take for you to put on these pounds? You don’t become overweight in two weeks – more likely in terms of months and years. Besides, how many pounds did you lose prior to the two week plateau? Have you forgotten the success you’ve had already?

Accentuate behavior, not weight

Finally, you must stop emphasizing pounds lost over a specific period of time. That’s really trivial from a long-term standpoint. Instead, begin emphasizing behavior. Ask yourself, what changes in eating behavior have you achieved? Are you sitting down to eat now? Eating more slowly? Leaving just a little bit on your plate? Making eating a sole experience (not associated with other activities – e.g., TV, reading, etc.)? Pre-planning snacks as well as meals? Keeping food records and recording energy intake? These are the elements of your weight control effort that really count.

If, indeed, you have made some changes in these habits, then it’s time to pat yourself on the back, and say something encouraging to yourself, such as: “I am making progress, slowly but surely. Over the long haul, these lifestyle changes will have been worth the effort. Without them, I’d be very likely to quickly regain any weight I might have lost during this two-week period.”

The I-Q-R technique

There is a three step sequence in rectifying crooked thinking, the *IQR technique*: IDENTIFY – QUESTION – REPLACE.

IDENTIFY: By knowing the categories of crooked thinking, you can detect these thoughts when they occur.

QUESTION: Next, you evaluate them for being rational and reasonable. This involves an analysis of the self-dialogue. Examine it for appropriateness. Are you hyperbolizing? Being fatalistic? Blaming others or circumstances for your inertia? Expecting perfection and unreasonable goals for yourself? This is a very important step because it sets the stage for how you will carry out the final stage of the sequence.

REPLACE: Based on the irrationality of self-talk, you may wish to re-interpret the situation. You may also wish to alter your belief system. Based on this reevaluation, you now exchange the negative, self-destructive monologue for positive, constructive, appropriate self-talk. This requires patience and persistent effort. Remember that your attitudes have developed over many years. Expect changes in your thinking to be gradual. Some of the old selfdestructive thoughts are deeply engrained. Rome wasn't built in a day. Your negative attitudes cannot be relied upon to suddenly vanish. Just when you think you've supplanted an old inappropriate self-criticism, it will crop up again, especially when you're exposed to stress. When under pressure, we tend to revert to our old negative patterns. That should be a signal to you that you've still got a problem.

Make a learning experience out of it. How? By using problem-solving approaches for maladapted behaviors. Once crooked thoughts have been thoroughly aired and have literally been laid out on the table, they are subject to the same methods that are effective for habit change.

Some hints for analysis

The most important step of the I-Q-R technique is the second one, questioning the reasonableness of a thought. To determine whether a thought should be placed in the "unreasonable" category, it is best to use "logic" in an organized manner. We suggest the following steps:

1. Put it in a form you can analyze.

If you're going to ascertain whether a thought is "crooked," it must be stated in such a way that it can be examined for reasonableness. For instance, to say, "I am afraid to be alone at night" cannot be either proved or disproved. You are merely reporting a feeling, namely, that you are afraid under certain circumstances. The reasonableness of that thought cannot be examined without more information or without making it conditional. That is, your being afraid of being alone at night must be conditional upon something else (e.g., you have a tendency to overeat under these circumstances). A good technique for putting your thought into a meaningful form is to use two basic words: should and because. So, the above thought can be rephrased: "I SHOULD feel afraid to be alone at night, BECAUSE I overeat under these circumstances." Now we have something to work with –

something that can be analyzed for correctness or incorrectness.

2. Expand on the meaning of words.

In order to be able to judge if a statement is true or false, you must know exactly what you mean or imply by the words you use. All key words should be clearly defined, so that there is no doubt about their true meaning in the context of your statement. The key words in the above statement are: afraid, alone, night and overeat. The truth of the thought will vary, dependent upon their real connotation. So, let's take a look at each key word in that thought:

AFRAID: filled with fear or apprehension; terribly frightened; filled with concern or regret over an unwanted contingency; disinclined; reluctant; worried; awful. (As you can see there are various degrees of meaning; pick the one that really applies here; probably worried comes closest to expressing your true thought.)

ALONE: separated from others; exclusive of anyone or anything else; desolate; forlorn; lonely; lonesome; solitary; without aid. (On analysis you may decide that there is really no sense of loss or dreariness involved, but mainly a feeling of having to depend upon yourself without support.)

NIGHT: the time from dusk to dawn when no light of the sun is visible; an evening taken as an occasion or point of time; a period to resemble the darkness of night. (You may actually be referring to the time between 8 p.m. and midnight, when your spouse ordinarily arrives home – a four-

hour period – rather than the entire night.)

OVEREAT: to eat too much; to eat to excess; to eat again; to snack continuously; to eat leftovers; to eat whatever is in sight; to raid the refrigerator; to go on a binge. (On examining food records you find that leftovers from dinner are the main culprit.)

Sometimes it is helpful to look these types of words up in the dictionary. It will allow you to crystallize your thinking. Words such as good, bad, evil, crazy, wrong, sinful, irresponsible, ought, love, hate, etc., have many meanings, and the truth of a particular thought will depend on how you define these words. With the simple examination of the four key words in our example, we are now able to restate the original thought with a more explicit meaning: “I should be worried when I am by myself and have to depend on my own strength, without support from others, between 8 p.m. and midnight, because I tend to eat the leftovers from dinner.” Now, that’s a statement you can sink your teeth into, and really examine for reasonableness.

3. Decide on the rules of the game.

Before you can prove or disprove anything, you must decide by what rules you are going to play. There is no point in collecting evidence unless you first decide what kind of evidence you need. You will need factual data to either support or reject the idea. How are you going to go about verifying your statement without deciding which facts are relevant to the issue? A

good formula to use in this step is to precede the method of proof with the words: “It is true if…” and “It is false if…”

Basically, there are five types of rules you can apply to solve the truthfulness of a statement.

1. Consult an authoritative source.
2. Use your powers of logic and reasoning.
3. Use your five senses.
4. Use your own past experience in this area.
5. What is generally accepted as true by others?

In the example we have been using, you would apply knowledge gained from past experience, logic and an authority in the field.

Let us elaborate a bit on the reason for making specific choices for specific problems. One method might be suitable for a particular situation, yet, may be absolutely ridiculous when applied to another. For instance, if you wanted to know if the sun revolves around the earth or vice versa, or if someone can be trusted, you would not use your senses. They might tell you that the sun does, indeed, revolve around the earth (at least it looks that way to you – your senses), and, of course, you would be totally wrong. Instead, you should consult an authoritative source. Conversely, to determine if you like the taste of a certain kind of chocolate, you will have to depend on your senses. An authoritative source could not supply you with that kind of information.

4. Examine data, and 5. Make judgment.

After having accumulated relevant data, based on the method(s) you have picked to prove the rationality of the statement, you examine all the evidence with a critical eye. Finally, you act like the judge in a court of law and render your verdict: *true or false?* If the statement has been declared false, it means that you could not come up with any evidence to fully support it. Therefore, it is classified as a “crooked thought” and should be countered with a rational one. Since this involves logic and reasoning, your previous analysis of the thought will be of tremendous help in formulating a replacement. Keep in mind, however, that the irrational thought may be very strong (it may have been there a long time, and you’ve had more practice with irrational self-talk). Years of crooked thinking cannot be expected to vanish from a few minutes of logical reasoning. Yet, if you persist and work very hard with this method, the truth will win out. Eventually, you will achieve a new perspective of the world that surrounds you and your emotional reaction to it.

Applying the method

A good way to learn the five steps of analyzing crooked thinking is to study the following illustration of an actual application of the technique. Here is the *thought* to be evaluated for reasonableness: “I might as well quit my dieting efforts because that cheesecake I had will cost me several pounds. I am just a failure because I can never stick to a diet on weekends.”

True meaning of words:

QUIT: no point going on; stop all efforts to reduce.

FAILURE: I am totally unsuccessful in my dieting attempts; it's a complete disaster.

NEVER: at no time, or under any circumstances has there ever been a weekend during which I stuck with the program.

Rules of the game:

IT'S TRUE IF one mistake is sufficient cause for stopping all efforts to control my weight.

IT'S TRUE IF an average piece of cheesecake contains at least 100,000 calories or more.

IT'S TRUE IF I have never been successful in any of my dieting attempts.

IT'S FALSE IF I have been successful in losing some weight already on this program.

IT'S FALSE IF there have been weekends in my past life during which I have successfully followed a pre-planned food program.

Examination of the data:

a) No one is perfect. Everyone makes mistakes. Those that get right back on after the deviation are the ones that are successful in the long term.

b) One average piece of cheesecake contains about 400 calories. That's equal to slightly less than two ounces of body fat.

c) My past record shows that there have been times when I was very successful while dieting.

d) On weekends when I was pre-occupied with non-food related activities that I enjoyed, I didn't even think about food. In fact, I ate very little during those times.

Final judgment of statement:

The statement is *false!* It is irrational and represents crooked thinking. I will replace it with the following realistic thought:

“Why should one slice of cheesecake containing 400 calories undo all the hard work I've done so far? I'm not a participant in the Olympics and don't have to be perfect. I'm learning a new lifestyle, and changing lifelong maladaptive eating habits takes a long time. I'm making slow but steady progress, am proud of my success thus far, and will learn to handle weekends gradually, in small progressive steps. Setting standards too high is unrealistic.”

Tune-in to your thoughts

Our example illustrates what you should do when a self-defeating series of thoughts occur to you. But how do you get started? You cannot analyze your thinking unless you increase your awareness of your thought processes first. Well, you can use the same techniques you used in becoming more aware of your eating behavior; that is, becoming mindful not only of what you eat, but also how you eat. Just as you were observing whether you were eating standing up, while reading, when alone, at a party, etc., you should begin to monitor your thoughts.

This can be accomplished by record keeping. You are already used to keeping food records on which you record not only foods ingested, but also surrounding circumstances. Similarly, you can keep “Thought Records.” Each time you have a food-related thought, jot it down. Since you are carrying the food records with you at all times anyway (at least, you are supposed to), a good place to write these thoughts is on the back of the food record. Some people prefer to carry some 3 x 5 cards to accomplish this task. Exactly how you do it is unimportant. But get the job done! We cannot deal with our thoughts unless we first collect the data. In all respects, this is identical to what is required of behavior change. Get it down in black and white first! You have already learned that you can often alter your behavior by manipulating your environment. If, up to now, you thought it was not possible to alter your emotions (especially those that lead to overeating), this handout is designed to help you achieve exactly this kind of control. As we have already stated, you must modify your thinking in order to transform the way you feel.

Listening to your own thoughts is a new experience. You will get better with practice. Remember how much trouble you had when you first started keeping detailed food records? You will also recall that it became easier with time. When you are first beginning to tune in to your food thoughts, you may deduce that you do not have these thoughts very often. This merely reflects the newness of this method. As you become more expert at detecting such thoughts (with practice), you may be astonished how frequently they do occur. After the thoughts

have been recorded and are out in the open you can deal with them.

Restructuring the mental ecology

Once you are cognizant of your thoughts, you are ready to apply the *I-Q-R technique*. In psychological terms, this has been called cognitive restructuring. To put it in lay terms, it means straightening out crooked thoughts! If you have a thought that seems unreasonable, write down a rational replacement thought – right below the irrational statement. Completing this sequence of maneuvers should indicate to you that you can be proud of that achievement. You have taken the first positive step in solving emotional overeating. Notice our use of the word **PRIDE** rather than **PRAISE**. Any effective weight control program must be built on **PRIDE** in your attainments, not **PRAISE** by others. Praise is not nearly as dependable because it is usually not forthcoming when you need it the most.

The analysis method we have described in detail will enable you to evaluate any thought for reasonableness. At the same time, it is not always necessary to go through this detailed procedure, because it has been found that 90 percent of most weight controller's crooked thinking falls into seven general subdivisions. If a self-talk statement falls into one of these classifications, it is almost surely an irrational thought. Once you have recognized a thought as belonging in one of the seven groupings, then all that remains to be done is to counter it (replace it with an appropriate thought).

"Mental rule book" of the obese person

We all grow up and learn a variety of rules about the way the world works. We get into trouble when we discover that some of the rules are **NUTTY!** Our thinking and perceiving is not always accurate and our behavior and response to this thinking is not always adaptive. You might envision the brain as being comparable to a very complex camera, one that is constantly photographing the input and storing the pictures. The mental rule book is like a series of lenses. They are responsible for the sharpness of the image that will be recorded on the film. Unfortunately, our belief system (mental rule book) is not always error-free. There are various deformities and defects that manage to infiltrate our lens system (mental rule book). Consequently, the final image (interpretation) will occasionally be distorted and twisted. Such a misrepresentation of factual data results in a crooked image (nutty thinking, crooked mental rule book).

So, the central problem is that one must distinguish between knowing something and believing it. Many of the things we teach to obese people are received with the sentiment: "Oh, that's a great idea. I'm all gung-ho for this concept. It sounds real good." Yet, the method is never adopted for incorporation into their own lifestyle. Why is that? Well, from our discussion it should be quite apparent why an idea is verbally and intellectually approved, but never implemented in practice. By the time it is filtered through our system of lenses (mental rule book) it has become so twisted that

our final interpretation leads us to feel that: "It's too difficult." "It doesn't apply to me." "I shouldn't have to work so hard to achieve weight control." "It's too restrictive. I want more freedom. It's not fair that I have to be so careful." Or, it might come out just the opposite: "I don't have to do that. I'm getting along O.K. with the way I'm handling it now." "My problem isn't bad enough to require such drastic measures." "I'm too busy. Don't have the time for it. I have more

important things I have to attend to right now." "Such disastrous consequences of being overweight won't happen to me. Maybe to someone else – but, NOT

ME!" Finally, the thought to end all nutty thoughts (excuse the slight dramatization for the sake of emphasis): "I don't really have to do anything about my obesity problem right now. Nothing serious is going to happen to me if I go on this way. The spaceship will land just in time, deliver a new miracle drug, save me from disaster, and cure me of this curse forever."

These statements are all representative of crooked thinking, based on nutty and twisted rules that reside in our mental rule book. The seven categories of warped and distorted thoughts follow:

Each time you have a food-related thought, jot it down.

Seven groups of nutty thinking of the obese person

NUTTY RULE #1: There are some basic misconceptions about known facts. Many people have misconceptions about the energy value of certain foods (e.g., the caloric value of the cheesecake in the previous illustration). There are

also many misconceptions about the contribution of increased activity to energy expenditure (e.g., “increased activity has a negligible effect on weight loss” – it ignores the cumulative effect). Consulting an authoritative source is all that is required to prove that a thought is irrational. This is the easiest category to correct. All it requires is education (e.g., the sun does not revolve around the earth).

NUTTY RULE #2: Externalizing – we tend to blame other people and outside events for the problem we are having in controlling weight. Typical self-talk would be: “It wasn’t me. I wanted to stay on the diet. Did you see all that luscious food at that party? How could anyone resist that banana cream pie?”

“It’s my spouse’s fault. He/She shouldn’t have criticized me for having that dish of ice cream. He/She made me do it! I got so mad that I ate the whole quart. I’ll show them! He/She will feel sorry for ever saying that.” (Note that the guilt is shifted from yourself to another person with this maneuver. This is also an example of how crooked thinking is used as a coping technique for guilt. Of course, it leads to the emotion of anger, which then results in the maladaptive eating. Because of the need for approval and dependency on the spouse – see later discussion of needs – the anger cannot be expressed in direct aggressive behavior against the spouse.)

NUTTY RULE #3: We tend to think of everything in personal terms. Self-talk: “Everyone is staring at me. If I don’t have a drink or eat like everyone else, they’ll think I’m crazy. I’m the only

one who is fat in this group and I stand out like a sore thumb. I better have a jolly attitude so they can laugh with me, rather than at me.”

NUTTY RULE #4: We tend to indulge in dichotomous reasoning. Everything is either good or bad, up or down, right or wrong, black or white. We have already pointed out that we tend to ignore a continuum of correctness. There are shades of gray. Self-talk: “I shouldn’t have had that dessert. I blew my diet! Might as well enjoy myself and eat everything in sight for the rest of this week. I’ll start again next Monday.”

NUTTY RULE #5: We tend to overgeneralize and speak globally, or hyperbolize. Self-talk: “I goofed again. This is the third time this week. I feel so demoralized and worthless as a human being. I’m just a total failure. Why even try? I’ll always be an incurable wretch. For a while I thought I had this whipped, but I’m still the same horrible, awful, crummy person that I’ll always be. I might as well quit. I just can’t cut the mustard. I’ll ALWAYS be a failure!” (Note the tendency to disasterize and treat everything as a catastrophe).

NUTTY RULE #6: We keep a mental list of all the things we “should” or “ought” to do. How many times have we told ourselves that we ought to be a good father, mother, daughter or husband? Certainly we have told ourselves that we should be a good person, or a good dieter. That means that we must strive for perfection 100 percent of the time. Obviously, no one can do all things perfectly, all the time.

NUTTY RULE #7: To determine our self-worth, we compare ourselves to other people. We often set up unreasonable goals for ourselves. We forget that we can’t all look like Miss Universe or Mr. America. Furthermore, we do not all have the same talents, and should not judge our self-worth based on a comparison with the performance of another person. Self-talk: “Poor me, I feel so deprived. If I were to eat like my skinny husband (or wife), I’d weigh three times as much as I do now. It’s so unfair. God has cursed me this way. There is no justice in this world!” (Example of rational replacement thought: Well, maybe He did. So what. We have to deal with what we have and keep things in reality).

The consequences of using these nutty thoughts for our mental rule book are many. A couple follow:

We tend to focus on the past. “I’ve always been fat, my mother and father were fat, my brothers and sisters are fat, my dog is fat, etc. I can never change. I’ll always remain fat.”

We tend to focus on our bodies and bodily functions. “I’m loathsome to look at. I just feel like a pig when I eat a big meal. I feel all swollen up. I am so ashamed of myself, but I can’t suffer through any more hunger pangs. I have more hunger than other people.” (There is no convincing scientific evidence that hunger is greater in some people. We all have the same physiological cues. Certain people are simply more sensitive to various sensations because they tend to *pre-occupy* themselves with these sensations and *focus in* on them. So, they are more aware that they exist.)

Why crooked thinking almost ensures failure in weight control

You must exert every effort possible to get your mental rule book in order. Self-destructive monologues can cause the collapse of the most well-intentioned commitment to stay with your weight control program. The reason is that self-talk is very inextricably entwined with four basic needs that all obese people possess, at least, to a certain degree. We will briefly discuss each one of these so that you will appreciate the importance of the technique.

THE NEED FOR APPROVAL OR ACCEPTANCE. Many overweight people find it very difficult to continue their efforts without approval from others. They cannot take the risk of offending anyone. Every year brings out a new breed of diets. Almost everyone you speak to is a self-styled expert in weight reduction. The individual trying to adhere to a specific food plan will receive much advice from these so-called experts as to what he or she should or should not do. If you were to follow all their many recommendations, you would become extremely confused. Such a state of mind can be the basis of some pretty crazy self-talk.

THE NEED FOR CERTAINTY. This tends to lead us into rigidity. One of the problems with diet club eating is that we are drilled in a certain way. When something happens to throw us off the rigid diet plan, our self-talk will apprise us that “all is lost.” Can you see how our need for certainty relates to two of the categories in our book of crooked mental rules (dichotomous

reasoning and hyperbolizing)?

THE NEED FOR COMFORT. We shouldn't have to work hard to get what we want. “Yeah, it would be great to lose weight, but don't expect me to do any work. If you are going to make me work hard so that I can get in control of my weight, I'll go somewhere else.” This type of crooked self-talk has been called the “magic wand syndrome.” We are forever looking for the magic substance that will make us thin forever, without any effort on our part. These thoughts are very self-destructive and are probably the most common cause of dropouts from weight control programs that are geared to lifestyle change (as they must be for significant long-term results).

THE NEED TO SUCCEED. “I want to be perfect. I want it to be easy. And, I want it right now! Instant Weight Control!” Unfortunately, there is no such animal.

All four of these NEEDS lay the foundation for failure during a weight control effort if you attempt to satisfy them with irrational thinking.

Breaking the eating chain

In learning to cope with emotional eating, it is helpful to look upon the process as if it were a chain with many links. We can alter the series of events by intervening at any of the links that compose the chain. Obviously, the

Self-destructive monologues can cause the collapse of the most well-intentioned commitment to stay with your weight control program.

earlier we intervene, the more effective will we be in our attempt of interfering with the end result: overeating. It seems that the links become stronger as you near the end of the chain that represents the output or final maladaptive eating behavior.

Nipping it in the bud

Dealing with the stimulus or initiating event by, for instance, avoiding it, undoubtedly prevents the chain from being formed, and thus annuls the emotional arousal that invites the coping response of food ingestion. These signals must therefore be identified (facilitated by studying well-kept food intake records) and either eliminated from your environment (avoidance technique) or managed more skillfully with proper pre-planning. If the situation cannot be totally avoided, your response to it can often be altered by techniques described in some of our other publications. People who trigger an emotional response can be dealt with more effectively by using assertiveness techniques (see *It's Your Right to be Thin!*). Special events (e.g., holidays, vacations, parties, restaurants, etc.) can each be controlled with specific methods distinctly suited to their unique problems (see *Pre-Planning: The Number One Weapon in the Battle of the Bulge!*).

Beyond the first link

Interruption of the chain can also be practiced at a link further along the succession of events. We have already described in considerable detail that interpretation of an event precedes the resultant feeling. You can choose to change your conception of the signal. For instance, if your spouse makes a derogatory remark about you, you can either become angry, or you can choose to translate the comment to mean that he or she is angry about something else that happened earlier in the day, or, maybe merely expressing pent-up hostility against you. Your interpretation might lead you to realize that he is really the one who's "got the problem" and that he is acting out against you, because you're the only one on whom he dares to vent his frustrations. Rather than getting mad at him, you might feel sorry for him, for the immature way he copes with his problems. Thus, the emotion of anger is expeditiously converted to one of SYMPATHY by the simple expedient of your changing your concept of the true implication of his remark.

Further down the road

An interpretation of the input must first pass through your mental rule book before it results in an emotion. That means that there has to be some self-talk, if only briefly, in advance of the sentiment. In the example of your spouse's faultfinding remark, your self-talk might have been as follows: "Who does he think he is anyway? That was a completely uncalled for remark. I get so mad when he talks that way to me."

By using the I-Q-R technique, you might change this monologue to something like this: "I'm not going to play his game and get into an argument with him. He is behaving like a child. So, I am going to respond to him like a parent responds to an ill-tempered child."

The next point of coping is when an emotion is already present. Whenever possible, it is always better to interject at an earlier link in the chain. Nevertheless, there will be times when you are already overcome by a feeling and you have no alternative other than to deal with it. The best technique at this point is to use the relaxation and meditation techniques. Suffice it to say here that, in order for these methods to be effective, you must practice this skill at regular intervals when you are NOT emotionally aroused. These techniques are excellent ways of coping with stress, but they cannot be learned efficiently during periods of emotional tension. They must be mastered beforehand, so that they can be utilized for stress reduction. Once you become adept at this technique, you will be able to relax almost instantaneously and for short periods of time. For example, when you arrive at a stoplight that has just turned red, you can use the minute before it turns green to relax and rejuvenate instead of anxiously gripping the steering wheel and building up more tension because you are behind schedule. Your impatient attitude is not going to make the signal change any sooner. So, you might as well grab the opportunity to relieve the tensions of driving. Appropriate self-talk: "Great, here is my chance to take a brief moment and relax, so that I'll arrive at my destination with a calmer state of mind, more

composed, and do the things I want to do when I get there." These brief recovery interludes can work wonders for your disposition during a hectic day.

Another coping method is a brief nap, or simply going to sleep. For instance, when you first come home from work, fatigued and exhausted, instead of heading straight for the refrigerator, take a brief snooze. The scheduled siestas in some cultures have much to recommend them.

The final link

Suppose you find yourself in the midst of an aroused state of mind. Is it too late to do anything at the last link of the chain of events? Certainly not. You still have the choice of turning to food or using an alternate activity (AA). At the same time, AA Strategy requires some pre-planning for its implementation. It is always wise to have a back-up tactic, in case you miss intervening during an earlier link, or if your first line of defense plan malfunctions. We can all learn from our space exploration missions. It never hurts to have a back-up. The AA strategy is well suited as a back-up for many other techniques used for weight control.

There is another special advantage of using the AA strategy for emotional overeating problems. Not only will it usually remove you from the triggering event (e.g., going for a walk), but it will tend to draw your attention away from the emotional state that induces you to eat. Thus, it permits your aroused feelings to gravitate back to a more steadfast and well-regulated level.

Types of emotional states

Having discussed the general principles of dealing with emotionally triggered eating, let us now describe some specific emotional states and the pertinent aspects of the overall approach that are most useful in gaining control over this kind of maladaptive eating behavior. The most troublesome emotional states are as follows:

1. Fatigue and depression
2. Boredom and loneliness
3. Anger and frustration
4. Anxiety

All four of these consist of two components: the *mental* one (thoughts, self-talk) and the *behavioral* one (coping activity). The mental constituent is governed by your interpretation of the particular circumstance and also by your belief system. As we have already shown, either one of these may be distorted (crooked). The element that regulates the coping response often leads to fruitless and unrewarding behavior that usually compounds the problem. This ushers in more censoring self-talk and results in a vicious cycle of self-renunciation, self-reproach and self-condemnation. What may have started out as a minor dietary transgression terminates in a major deviation from the food plan.

Fatigue and depression

Fatigue is probably the number one enemy of the person attempting to control their weight. When we feel fatigued even the most firm resolution to stick with a

program is severely weakened. Even though you may be well versed in a number of lifestyle change techniques, when you suffer from chronic fatigue, you will often lack the energy to take the necessary steps to remedy the situation. The fatigued individual may know exactly what needs to be done, but simply lacks the necessary capacity and forcefulness to effectively utilize the techniques that would get her out of the rut she is in. The fatigued feeling is self-perpetuating. The individual simply cannot bring herself to take that first step that would reverse her fatigue and she becomes more weary and exhausted. It is often accompanied by inappropriate self-talk such as: “I’m too tired to exercise” – or – “It just takes too much effort to keep food records.” These types of self-defeating thoughts will prevent recovery. They must be recognized as “crooked thoughts” and be rectified with the techniques described in this handout. For instance, the best way to feel like exercising is to *start to exercise!* It is extremely difficult to convince a fatigued person that he or she must become more active to feel better.

It should be quite apparent that irrational thinking is the biggest stumbling block in this situation. This is why a thorough understanding of this treatise is so important for improving your chances of success. Fervor, momentum and forcefulness must be generated – first in the mind! The strength and vitality to carry out a weight control program can only be realized with a careful restructuring of your attitudes and belief

system. Thoughts have to precede action!

Two peas in a pod

Fatigue is also commonly accompanied by depression. That is why we have lumped the two together. Depression is a feeling of despondency and utter hopelessness. It is often experienced in reaction to a loss. It may be the loss of an important opportunity or the loss of a valued relationship and is associated with melancholy, pessimism and gloominess. It is a state of mind characterized by despair and sorrow. It has a quality of dejection that encompasses thoughts of self-depreciation and disgust with yourself and life in general. Sometimes it is the sequel to a series of past failures, or the consequence of unremitting real or imagined forces against which you feel powerless and unprotected. This sense of frustration leads to self-talk which says, in effect: “There’s no point trying, because nothing will work.” “My countless failures of the past bear this out.” “I’m doomed to make the same mistakes I’ve made in the past, again and again.” That’s the mental component.

The behavioral component of depression is inertia and inactivity. The lack of enthusiasm (“nothing helps, I’ve tried it all”) leads to lethargy and sluggishness which ultimately culminates in a feeling of extreme fatigue. The fatigue is derived from both a mental and physical component. It follows that the remedy to this malady lies in

The best way to feel like exercising is to start to exercise!

correcting crooked thinking and becoming more active to overcome the physical inertia.

Effect of lack of favorite foods

The food deprivation inherent in any weight reducing attempt may serve as the loss which triggers depression to some degree. You must therefore expand your thinking to include the more positive aspects of participating in a comprehensive weight control program. Looking forward to the achievement of true weight control and being so fortunate as being able to share in an approach to weight control that is available to few people is hardly deprivation.

Additionally, who says you have to feel like doing something before you do it? There are many activities which you start enjoying only after you engage in them. When you are in a state of inertia it becomes doubly important that you do not wait until you feel like engaging in an activity. You could be waiting forever. What you need to do is to wind yourself up like a robot and GET STARTED! Once into the activity, the odds are greatly in your favor that you will soon feel much better. You will be amazed how the accomplishment of a task will do wonders for your mental attitude. That's the secret of overcoming depression and fatigue. Don't wait, but start now!

Boredom and loneliness

Boredom is a blanket feeling of weariness that may often be associated or confused with tiredness. In obese people it is usually the result of not having developed enough *non-food interests*. Our indefatigable brains need to be fed with constant stimulation in order to subsist. Living in an environment where such stimulation is lacking leads to a dulling of our



perceptions and a loss of a normally lively spirit. Our mental processes drift aimlessly and purposelessly, alertness suffers, and ability to concentrate on any kind of ambitious objective is impaired. Since mental needs for excitement are not met by a drab and monotonous environment, any interests you might have had are demoralized and deteriorate into a humdrum, unimaginative existence. This lackluster state of mind may result in a frantic search for some excitement; the search ends in acquiescent idleness. Resigning yourself to a lifeless and stagnant existence engenders a quest for the potential excitement to be found in the taste thrills of various foods – as the only escape!

Loneliness frequently goes hand in hand with boredom. It affects many people in our society. It will still be there after weight loss, goal weight having been achieved. There may be only certain hours of the day during which you are alone. These are also the most dangerous hours for most people. A majority of overeating is done when no one is watching. So, it becomes doubly

important that you plan your time so that you are always occupied with a wide range of absorbing and pleasant activities. Just as food can distract you from a disagreeable task, so can a challenging and gratifying task distract you from the desire to eat. Hobbies, arts, crafts, etc., are all suitable if they fascinate and engross you – and if the necessary materials are at hand, so that you can begin them at a moment's notice. Books are fine if you can get preoccupied with their content. It is a good idea to have several types of books (for different moods) available, all of which you have already started reading. Sitting down to read a new book from the beginning can be more like work rather than relaxation until you become enraptured and captivated by the contents. If you have already read the first portion, it will be much easier to become quickly involved with the book's subject matter and divert your attention away from food.

Avoiding the “scene of the crime”

Phoning a friend, or better yet, getting out of the house to visit him or her are additional strategies to overcome boredom and loneliness. A trip to your local library is an excellent way to transpose yourself to an environment filled with all sorts of stimulating materials to occupy your mind and yet one in which food is completely absent.

If your periods of being alone are lengthy, volunteer work or a part-time job may be just what the doctor ordered. All these methods will require some carefully organized planning to ensure your

making the correct choices of what is *pleasant and enjoyable* for you. For a detailed discussion of how you can *widen your horizons* of interests, see our handout *Enthusiastic Weight Control!*

Initiate change by taking action!

Sometimes boredom and loneliness can reach such overwhelming proportions that they carry you to the brink of panic. This is usually caused by crooked thinking. You may harbor the illusion that you are a mediocre or inferior person because you experience periods of loneliness in your life. It is well to remember that we all experience being alone at some time in our lives. These times can be used very productively for meditation and tuning in to our true feelings. These periods can also have a regenerative effect, allowing us to become better prepared to resume relationships with others.

Irrational self-talk may also create the infantile delusion that you cannot survive without others, or without a specific person's deep affection for you. This should be carefully examined with the I-Q-R technique. Dependency on others may be necessary for an infant, but remember you have grown up. As an adult, these needs may no longer be appropriate for you.

Conversely, if you really want more contact with others, then you must REACH OUT. You must take the initiative and begin the search for someone who will be receptive to the involvement you have in mind. This may take time, so be patient.

In dealing with loneliness and boredom, just as with fatigue and depression, you must take the necessary steps to change the unpalatable situation. You cannot assume a passive role and do nothing. Things will not change unless you actively initiate change. That is what is meant when you are told that in weight control you cannot remain a passive recipient, but must become an ACTIVE PARTICIPANT!

Anger and frustration

The mechanism inciting anger is the antithesis to the one that instigates boredom. In the latter, one feels bored because nothing happens. In the former, anger is aroused by something that either did happen or was presumed to have happened! An offensive remark, maltreatment, or generally impertinent behavior by others can incite this powerful emotion. Crooked thinking may provoke an angry reaction due possibly to a distorted interpretation: "I have been misused, abused, unjustly trampled upon." "My rights have been violated, either intentionally or neglectfully." The wrath may be aimed directly at the provoker. An assertive rather than an aggressive retort is generally a healthier way to respond to the offending person. It can often be used to enhance your communications with others. Occasionally, our animosity will be directed against an innocent accomplice who is presumed to be guilty by association. The worst alternative is when the anger is turned within, because it may lead to sabotaging your own weight control program. The enraged wife who stuffs herself with food to express hostility against an unfaithful husband ("I'll show you

– you'll be sorry you did that to me"), or the obese child cramming food into his mouth to indicate his resentment against his parents, both illustrate this method of expressing rage by turning to food.

What you eat in private shows in public!

Holding the anger in or directing it against yourself are immature coping methods which are self-destructive. When eating is used to allay your indignation, it is often done in private in an attempt to hide this indirect, self-defeating counterattack.

Anger is a normal, healthy emotion and should be voiced in a truthful expression of your feelings. If the emotion has been provoked by a distorted interpretation, then an analysis of the irrational self-talk is in order.

Frustration is the inescapable consequence of self-directed anger. It may also be a component of boredom and depression. The primary technique of handling this emotion is to prevent it (by dealing with the other emotions as described previously). The basic root cause of frustration is ineffective problem solving. So, if the feeling cannot be prevented, you need to use the problem-solving approach to take a fresh look at the series of events that caused the frustration. It is also possible to build up your tolerance to this feeling by practicing responding to it with non-food activity. The more you practice alternate activities, the easier will it become to deal with frustration.



Anxiety and mental anguish

Mental distress might be looked upon as a coin

with two sides. One side is *depression*; the other is *anxiety*. We have already defined depression as being a reaction to something that has happened in the past – something that usually involves the loss of matter or an issue of value. Anxiety, on the other hand, is a FEAR of some unknown future happening. It is a tense feeling often expressed as worry and may be associated with a number of psychosomatic symptoms (bodily symptoms as a result of mental conflict). These symptoms can include such varied manifestations such as sweating, heart palpitations, headaches, intestinal distress – e.g., gas, heartburn, bloating, cramps, diarrhea, skin rashes, wheezing, irregular menstrual periods, and many more. Ordinary fear differs from anxiety in that it is focused on a specific threat. Anxiety, however, is a vague fear of a possible future experience. Since the threat is ill-defined and uncertain, you can be confused, unsettled, and perplexed. You do not have a precise course to pursue in order to allay your fears. You are aroused (emotion), your wheels are spinning, but you have no concrete target at which you can direct your action. All systems are go, but your behavior (response) is completely ineffectual and futile.

Distressing but not dangerous

The mental rule book tells you that “something dreadful is going to happen.” Your response is to find

ways to defend yourself against this intangible danger. You attempt to use, in rapid succession, a series of safeguards, in the hope of warding off the danger. But because the hazard is so intangible your efforts are universally aborted. To make things even worse, an individual who may have recently experienced a painful bout with anxiety, is often very nervous about the experience. That is, she will become anxious about her anxiety. As a result, the threat becomes more hazy and incomprehensible, compounding her already alarmed state of mind and making it almost impossible for her to deal with his emotion comfortably and efficaciously.

This type of an emotionally compounded state has a most devastating effect when it has you on the run. Therefore, you must stop running! You are most vulnerable when you’re trying to run away from it. You must face the anxiety directly. You might use the following monologue: “O.K., it’s distressing but not dangerous.”

Distressing but not dangerous!

Those are the four *magic words*, especially when dealing with the psychosomatic symptoms brought on by the anxiety.

The effectiveness of this simple phrase has been proved by the many thousands of members of Recovery Incorporated. By admitting the distress (a fact) but not the danger (a crooked thought), you remove much of the force of the anxiety. Another effective technique is physical relaxation (as mastered by *practice*); it is the gateway to mental relaxation.

Planning rest periods throughout your day, practicing meditation/relaxation techniques until you have mastered them, and

instituting a regular pattern of sleeping habits (more important than actual duration of sleep) are the best methods of stress reduction, a necessary prerequisite for you to get in control of the emotional states that encompass anxiety.

Exonerating inferior performance

Before concluding, we would like to discuss a series of very common self-defeating thoughts that will lead to inevitable failure. We have considered the various emotional states on an individual basis and have explained how your thoughts can bring them about. There is one other aspect of harmful self-talk that deserves special emphasis: rationalizing or justifying suboptimal performance. We feel this subject is so important that it deserves a separate section. Because weight control is hard work (no one will deny that), at some point in almost everyone’s weight control program, there will be a tendency to boycott the responsibility of becoming your own therapist (as you must, for long-term success). The discipline of the program becomes overbearing and you want a way to escape from the established rules of lifestyle change. This is a perfectly normal reaction and happens to most of us under such circumstances. Rather than abandon the program entirely (with the precognition of the guilt that may follow) it is easier to circumvent your commitment by using crooked thinking. In essence, it is a method of giving yourself permission to fail while at the same time blaming it on anything but your own unwillingness to admit your obligation of taking charge of your disciplinary efforts.

The most perilous word: “but”

This ploy may take many forms. Quite often it is directed at the person who guides your endeavor of reshaping your lifestyle. Crooked self-talk might go something like this: “My situation is unique, and your methods won’t work for me. Your program is no good.” Such fault finding may also take the form: “This is too complicated for me. I just cannot understand why I should have to perform all these exercises or develop the skills you request of me.” Another form of rebellion is more subtle: “Oh, this is all old stuff. I know all about that. You’re not telling me anything new.” These are all passive methods of defiance. It is well to remember that there is a big difference between knowing what needs to be done and actually applying what has been learned. These people precede almost every statement with “But this...” and “but that...” When you catch yourself using the word BUT too frequently, recognize it for the sabotage that it depicts. Unless you can identify these self-defeating thoughts, you will be using most of the consultation time with your professional teacher by bringing up all sorts of arguments for every helpful suggestion he or she attempts to make to you. This is, of course, completely unproductive, and in your aroused state of mind you really never give yourself a chance to listen to or evaluate the advice that is offered.

Ultimately, this type of an attitude leads to either one of two consequences. You may confirm your distorted belief that you are doomed to failure and are destined to remain fat. Or, you may insist that there is a better way (probably the latest fad diet) and waste time

trying to convert your professional monitor to your way of thinking. Since HE is the professional and YOU are the amateur in the realm of weight control – he has probably investigated or forgotten more methods than you could ever try out in your lifetime – your attempts to reverse the roles (which one of you is the doctor?) is an exercise in futility.

Unfortunately, both of these events finally terminate in your dropping out of the only program that has any chance of your ever getting in control of your weight problem.

Some more adroit ruses

Other maneuvers that attempt to reconcile inferior performance include such irrational attitudes as “I had no choice,” or “I was never told how important it was to learn these special skills.” You might complain that there is too much to learn, that you need a rest and you’ll start again later (used as an excuse for doing absolutely nothing in the meantime – not even keeping simple food records), or that what you are being asked to do is childish.

Nutty self-talk in this category includes: “I have to have these cookies in the house for my children, I can’t deprive THEM!” “I just can’t drink coffee black. I’ve ALWAYS eaten a Danish pastry in midmorning.” “I’ll start next Monday.” “This is all too psychological.” “You should have called me when I missed my appointment.” “I couldn’t get my family to cooperate.” “I’ll do all this later, when I’m not so busy.” Procrastination is one of the most

adverse outgrowths of crooked thinking.

The trickiest one of them all

Finally, there is a very subtle method of justifying inadequate achievement. In fact, it is quite seductive in its manner, and unless recognized for the subterfuge that it is, will surely lead to failure. You will appreciate the finesse of this tactic once you comprehend its elusive and intriguing sophistry. The irrational monologue is as follows: “I’m just so excited about this program; it’s the greatest! I’m learning so much about my lifestyle. It has assuredly contributed to other spheres of my life. I’m learning to be more assertive with my friends, even in nonfood related areas. I’m carrying out all my assignments. I know I haven’t lost any weight for the past two months, but my clothes fit so much looser. I don’t mind not having lost any weight because I am very impressed how much better I understand my problem.”

At first glance this sounds just great! But is it? No weight loss for two months? Now, we’ll admit there are such things as plateaus. But for two months? That’s a bit too long for any weight loss program. This is just another way of surreptitiously shirking the responsibility you must assume for your own weight loss. Indeed, it is a cunning and ingenious guise to abandon your commitment. It’s crooked thinking in its most deceptive form. Once you recognize the irrationality of this type of self-talk you will realize that you are only fooling yourself. Not until you understand the craftiness of this distortion will you be able to counter such misleading monologues with sensible thoughts

that will lead to the correction of the kind of behavior that prevented weight loss.

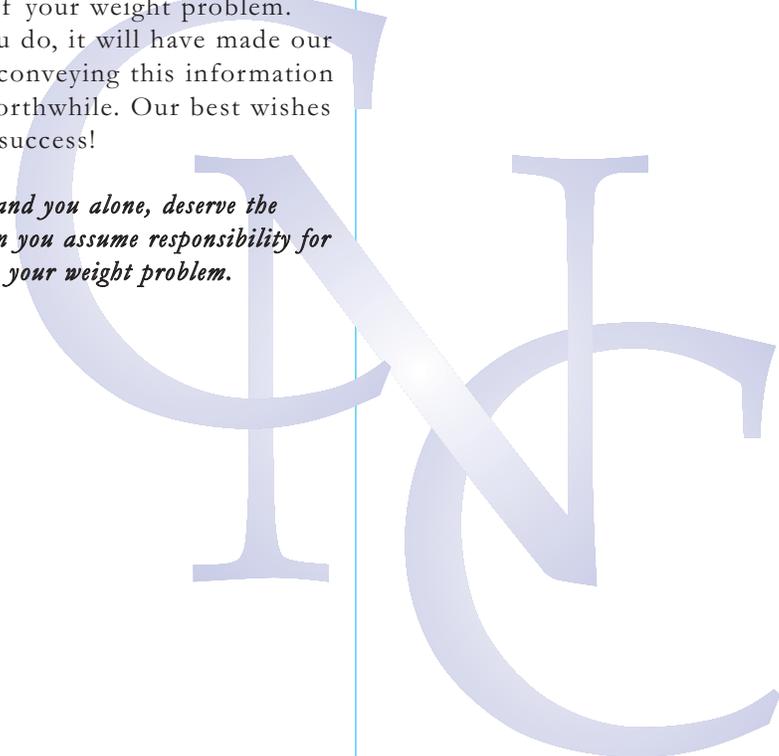
Learning to manage your mental environment

In summary, let us reiterate that emotions are a normal part of living. We all experience them. Yet, coping with our emotions by eating is rarely a befitting response. Certainly, this type of eating is maladaptive if it leads to obesity. Once you accept and adopt the concept that thoughts and interpretations precede feelings, and that you can intervene anywhere along the links of the chain that lead to inappropriate eating, you will have grasped the fundamental understanding necessary for coping with these emotions in a new way.

You now have the opportunity to practice methods of dealing with emotional eating, just as you had to carry out methods of managing your environment and certain prevailing eating behaviors. Techniques of getting in control of behaviors and techniques of regulating your thoughts (and the emotions which emanate from them) go hand in hand in a comprehensive approach of making the lifestyle changes necessary for meaningful long-term weight control. You must examine your mental rule book, analyze crooked thoughts, and counter them with rational beliefs and attitudes. This is a job that should be tackled in small steps, just as with all the other techniques of weight control. If a task seems too difficult, break it up into small manageable units. Work on them one at a time, beginning with the easiest ones, not progressing to the next step until you've mastered the one before it.

Have patience. It will take a long time to change lifelong habit patterns. Set reasonable goals for yourself and avoid perfectionism. With the techniques we have described, you have a way to affect your thoughts, just as you have others to control your behavior. From here on out, it's UP TO YOU! Reading about the methods is only a beginning. Putting them into practice is YOUR responsibility! We sincerely hope that you will accept this responsibility and get in control of your weight problem. When you do, it will have made our work of conveying this information to you worthwhile. Our best wishes for your success!

YOU, and you alone, deserve the credit when you assume responsibility for controlling your weight problem.



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