

# ENDING OVEREATING



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## *USING COMPASSION-FOCUSSED THERAPY TO OVERCOME BINGEING & DISORDERED EATING*

### Understanding Your Relationship with Food

Food can be a pleasure or a curse. Without it, we die, but with too much, we have a whole range of health problems. We eat for many reasons: because we're hungry, to be sociable, because we're miserable, or because we just like the taste and the pleasure of putting things in our mouths. We are surrounded by enticements to buy food and eat more. Simply telling ourselves not to eat too much is not a great help. Indeed, it tends to make things worse, because we then feel depressed and eat more to feel better.

The human brain has evolved to be attracted to foods that are high in fat and sugar, and our bodies evolved to store excess energy in the form of fat for leaner times. Your brain is not really designed to regulate you're eating, because humans evolved when food was hard to find, so we had to make the most of it when it was available. Our ancestors would have spent much of their time foraging or hunting for food, because it was in short supply. In this environment, the human brain did not evolve mechanisms for self-restraint because it did not need them. We evolved for the "see-food" diet: "see food and eat it"! You may recognize this tendency in your family dog. This tendency makes it very difficult for us in the modern world, where we have access to cheap, nutritious food and tend to be far less active than our ancestors who had to forage and hunt for days on end to get a few berries or a bird.

Being fed has always been a comforting experience for humans. Breastfeeding has calmed and soothed babies for millennia. Feeding is still comforting to us, as it signals the closeness and safeness of a caregiver. Eating and sharing our food solidifies our relationships with others and celebrates our successes. There has always been a link between sweet foods and rewards, or even being rewarded for being a "good" boy or girl. From the day we are born to the day we die, food is linked in our minds to enjoyment, treats, celebrating, socializing, having friends, caring, calming difficult emotions, and a sense of deserving.

Modern Western societies have allowed industries to exploit an old see-food-and-eat-it drive in our brains and those deep and powerful associations between food, pleasure, and security. We are squeezed in the middle between the pressures to overeat and the warnings that we shouldn't; and we end up blaming ourselves for problems we didn't cause. We end up feeling inadequate, ashamed, helpless, and hopeless at managing our eating and weight. These feelings, in turn, completely undermine our ability to cope with our difficulties.

So, it is not surprising that we turn to the diet industry for ready-made answers and hope, and then blame ourselves yet again when these solutions do not work. Yet research shows that only one dieter in twenty will maintain weight loss for more than a year. Research also shows that at the calorie levels suggested by most diet programs, people experience profound psychological and physical side-effects, called the starvation response:

- **Preoccupation with food and eating Episodes of overeating**
- **Low mood and irritability**
- **Becoming obsessive**
- **Difficulty concentrating**
- **Loss of interest in everyday activities Loss of sexual desire**
- **Feeling unsociable**
- **Relationship difficulties**

The starvation response appears to follow a specific pattern that is not confined to humans but can be seen in other species. It has two distinct phases: initially the body drives us to find food, and then, if these attempts fail, the body helps us to conserve its energy stores. The side effects of these responses can reinforce our attempts to lose weight, particularly in the early stages of a diet. However, the effects of stage two can often lead to weight gain and, in turn, to fear of our appetites and desires for food.

Some dieters can keep to their strict rules most of the time, but when they break them, they have the “screw it” response. They get angry at themselves for breaking their diets, and decide that if they have broken a rule, they might as well break it properly! This can lead to binge eating.

We are actually dealing with a complex relationship between our current diets, our weight, and our feelings about ourselves. It’s a bit tricky. We may eat because we are happy, we’re just enjoying eating, we’re celebrating, or any combination of reasons; we may eat because everybody else is eating, or we may eat because we feel unhappy, miserable, and alone; or we may eat to distract us from the unhappiness in our lives.

A compassionate approach to managing our weight moves away from moral judgments and their inherent criticism of our need and desire to eat. It requires us to support the changes in eating behaviour we wish to make without attacking and criticizing ourselves when we struggle, as we do when finding ways to manage our see-food-and-eat-it brain and complex emotional system. We also need to learn to focus more on our health and wellbeing, and less on the feelings of success or competition associated with seeing the numbers on the scale go down.

We need to learn other ways to feel a sense of success and to be comforted when we are distressed. This means putting food back in its place, as an important and enjoyable part of our lives, something that can be shared with others, not a threat to our health, success, beauty and wellbeing.

A compassionate approach ends the three major eating patterns that people who overeat tend to fall into:

- **The starve-eat cycle**
- **The starve-binge-purge cycle**
- **Chaotic eating**

A compassionate approach includes learning to:

- Regulate our eating in ways that are best for both our physical and psychological well-being.
- Accept and live comfortably with the fact that there are normal variations in human size, shape, and weight, and that the shape we might wish to have might not be the size or shape we are biologically designed to have.
- Accept and value human beings, including ourselves, regardless of their, and our, weight and shapes.
- Manage our feelings without using food as our main or only way of coping with distress.

## Eating & Your Feelings

All organisms have motivations to survive and reproduce. One way of thinking about our emotions is that they are a way to give us signals that we are succeeding or failing in these basic tasks of life. They help us to attach meaning to events and relationships, and to recognize that things we need. We have evolved their types of emotional systems. Each of these systems involves specific types of emotion, attention, thoughts, and behaviours that can be very helpful in guiding us to meet the challenges of life.

- **Threat/Protection System:** The first system is linked to detecting and dealing with threats, so it involves emotions like anger, anxiety, and disgust.
- **The Drive/Strive System:** The second system is linked to detecting and responding to good things, such as food, friendship, and sexual opportunities, and is linked to our drive to achieve and feelings of pleasure and excitement.

- **Affiliate/Soothing System:** The third system is associated with calm and contentment, and is linked with feelings of soothing, safety, and peace, and also compassion and connection with others (affiliation).

As we have seen, food can be a way of giving us reward or excitement, and these positive feelings can temporarily make us feel better. We can also learn to use food to soothe ourselves.

Indeed, the affiliative system can become very easily associated with food, particularly sweet foods, and we can learn to turn on this system by eating. This isn't surprising, given that our earliest experiences of feeding are often associated with experiences of care and affection. You can imagine that one of the reasons why we soothe ourselves in this way is that we can find it difficult to reach out to others and deal with our emotions in an open way (perhaps because we are ashamed or confused by them). We might even find that we're reaching for food before we've even realized that there is emotional distress in us. Also, if we tend to be self-critical and find it hard to be compassionate toward ourselves, then one way to tone down those negative feelings about ourselves is to turn to food.

Food can be associated with the drive/strive system – especially if you are on a diet. Thinking or being told that we are not allowed to do something can produce the urge in to do it even if we were not thinking about it before. This happens to many people any time they are around food. When they tell themselves they are not going to have a cake, they find that the urge to eat one becomes so overwhelming that they can't wait to have one. Indeed, we can take a great deal of pleasure in the craving for and anticipation of eating our forbidden foods.

If we are made to do without these forbidden foods, particularly if we use them to soothe ourselves, we can become angry, upset, or even anxious, and we can end up feeling rebellious and resentful. If we set up these rules ourselves, we can get into a real pickle, wanting to rebel against the rules, but also beating ourselves up for being so weak as to give in to our cravings; we can't really win sometimes, can we?

When we break our own rules about eating, we can be overwhelmed by a rush of emotion, often accompanied by anxiety-provoking thoughts, images, or memories. We often exaggerate the consequences of breaking the rules, imagining being rejected and abandoned. The fear and self-criticism switch on the threat/protection system, activating even worse feelings of anger, anxiety, and disgust. And again, we turn to food to soothe ourselves. I am sure you get the picture: it is a vicious cycle.

## Dieting Mind-Sets

Let's explore the concept of different types of mind-set, because it's a key idea in learning to develop a compassionate mind. There are particular types of dieting mind-sets that develop around food and eating:

### Food as Threat

For most people who diet, the threat will be weight gain. This means food itself becomes a threat because overeating interferes with the real or imagined positive consequences of controlling their weight.

Certain foods in particular may be seen as threatening, or it may be feeling full, or enjoying the taste of food that becomes the threat. You may spend lots of time thinking about eating and have many rules about what and when you can eat. You may invest a lot of time and energy in finding ways to avoid overeating, including planning and being on a diet. You may constantly compare your body to those of others.

### Achievement Through Weight Loss

Most people in this dieting mind-set will also become very engaged with the drive system. The problem here is that the drive system is a double-edged sword. On the upside, when you manage to keep to your diet, you get a buzz of pleasure and feel good about yourself, particularly in the early weeks of eating less. You may frequently weigh yourself, buy new clothes, and enjoy the compliments you receive for having lost weight. However, if you feel low and resort to comfort eating, or if you just get fed up and decide to rebel, then these positive feelings quickly dry up. When we have tried for something and then fail or suffer a setback, the balked drive system can switch on the threat/protection system, and in come all those familiar sinking feelings, disappointment, frustration, and anxiety. The weight creeps up again, as does the disappointment and frustration; and you're back on the merry-go-round.

### The Comfort-Food Mind-Set

This mind-set aims to help us with painful events, memories, and feelings, and relies on certain kinds of foods or ways of eating that can soothe us or block out pain. It is very common for this mind-set to be linked to loneliness and boredom. It is focused on the short-term alleviation of our distress, but in the long term, it is likely to lead to weight gain and more distress.

## The Food as Fun Mind-Set

Eating is associated with sharing, closeness, and having fun. There are literally hundreds of books and TV programs dedicated to cooking and presenting delicious foods. We often feel that our lives are so busy, hurried, and stressful that we deserve a nice meal with a bottle of wine at a good restaurant. This mind-set is rather childlike, wanting to do as it pleases and have a good time. This is not about comfort eating; it's more about the drive system taking over the show. However, the self-critical mind that's a strong part of those who diet, can be especially down on this food as fun mind-set the day after the party. So, the self-criticism kicks in, until the next weekend, when the rebellious, childlike mind-set says, "To hell with this! Let's have fun!" And so, the merry-go-round goes on.

## The Eat to Fit in, or Affiliative Eating, Mind-Set

Sharing eating can help to bring our affiliative soothing system into play. The combination of these feelings of belonging and safety with the physical pleasures of eating can be a really powerful factor in leading us to overeat. We can often eat to fit in with others, to be part of a social group.

Examples are the business lunch or dinner, the meal after a conference or meeting, or the Sunday lunch with the family. Sometimes we eat to please the people we love; if our partner has cooked a meal for us, we may eat to make them feel appreciated. Of course, this can lead to self-recrimination in the morning and activate the dieting mind-set again.

## The Food as Punishment Mind-Set

Some people know that the way they eat is not good for them but believe they don't deserve to be treated any better; they may even use the food or feelings of discomfort from overeating to hurt themselves for some reason. Often, they have traumatic or abusive histories.

## Shifting from Dieting Mind Toward a Compassionate Mind

Our attempts to self-regulate our destructive eating patterns fail because the dieting mind-sets are linked to the threat/protection system and/or the drive/strive system. ***It is necessary to stimulate the natural regulator of the brain and nervous system - the soothing system, by using compassionate refocusing, imagery and attention.***

Learning to develop the compassionate mind-set can reduce the power of our threatened, dieting, and comfort-food mind-sets and help us to find other ways to deal with the challenges of life.



Equipped with a compassionate mind, we are better able to make responsible and wise decisions that genuinely are in our best interests and support our wellbeing. Research shows that the practice of compassion increases well-being and affects brain functioning, especially in areas of emotional regulation and impulse control.

Compassionate imagery has positive effects on immune functioning, neuroendocrine and behavioural responses to stress, heart rate variability coherence, and reduces cortisol. It increases feelings of social connectedness, positive emotions and depression, anxiety, the need to overeat, and general psychopathology.

The compassionate mind is never critical but always understanding of the difficulties of modern living and the complexities of the other mind-sets we may have developed. However, it is by no means passive.

It is focused on and develops our inner wisdom. It is motivated to work in our best interests, to do things that are genuinely caring, and to help us to develop a sense of wellbeing in the long term. Compassion takes the long view about our health and happiness, always seeks the middle way and avoids rigidity and black-and-white decisions and behaviours –such as those inflexible dieting rules.

Compassion involves attributes ("what's") and skills ("how to"). These enable us to direct our attention compassionately, to think and reason compassionately, and to generate compassionate images and imaginings; to work on creating a bodily sense of compassion. Combined, these attributes and skills constitute the compassionate mind. The attributes of compassion are:

### Care for Well Being

This is about the motivation to be caring, the decision and commitment to relieve suffering in yourself and others.

### Sensitivity

This means being open to what's going on in and around you, learning to pay attention and notice when you or others are in distress or are experiencing certain emotions.

### Sympathy

Sympathy is the emotional connection to pain. Developing sympathy for ourselves means being sensitive and open to your difficulties and also moved by them.

### Distress Tolerance

This is a very important attribute. Here's why: When the threat/protection system is in control, it pushes us into avoidance, away from unpleasant feelings that are always threatening to us. The trouble is, if we always shy away from painful or frightening emotions and situations, we never learn that those difficult feelings are in fact bearable and that we can learn how to cope with them and the situations that provoke them.



On the other hand, if we learn to accept the difficult feelings – gently, kindly, and uncritically – we learn both that they are not in fact unbearable and that there are ways to cope with them. So, learning to tolerate our urges to overeat and our desires for food without acting on them, and noticing how we can stay with our feelings without taking action, can be very important.

### Empathy

Just as we can understand the minds of others, we can also come to understand our own minds. We can understand and have empathy for our struggles with food and eating. Empathy helps us to accept how our minds and bodies work.

### Nonjudgment

This means no condemnation; letting go of that angry desire to attack and be critical. The more we ease back from charging in and criticizing, the greater our chances for reflecting and thinking about how best to deal with our instinctive and learned desires and preferences for food.

### Preparing & Training the Mind for Compassion

- **Mindfulness** teaches us to become aware of the mind when it wanders and gently, kindly and without judgment or criticism bring it back on task; this “noticing and return, noticing and return...” is a key element of mindfulness.
- **Soothing breathing rhythm**, paying attention to slowing down and being sensitive to the link between bodily feelings and breathing; this is combined with *relaxation* exercises.

### Creating a Safe Place

- *Guided imagery* can be used to create a safe place, where you can experience safeness and calmness – a beautiful forest, a peaceful beach, a garden.
- *Imagine that the place itself takes joy and pleasure in your being there.*
- Go through *each sensory modality* (sight, sound, touch, smell) slowly with plenty of space.
- A *compassionate colour* is sometimes preferred.
- Engage in *soothing breathing rhythm* and imagine a colour you associate with warmth, compassion and kindness.
- Imagine the colour *entering through your heart area* and spreading through your body.
- Imagine the colour having *strength, wisdom, warmth and kindness.*
- The colour *wants to help you* – its sole intention is to heal you and it wants you to be happy and flourish.
- Create a *facial expression of kindness* on your own face as you focus on sensing that intention.

## Varieties of Compassion Focused Imagery

### Compassion to Your Self

Always begin with soothing breathing rhythm.

- *Imagine yourself expanding* as if your wisdom is making you bigger, more powerful and mature.
- *Imagine yourself being calm* and having wisdom, being sensitive, having the ability to tolerate difficulties, being warm and kind, being non-judgmental, wanting to help, relieve suffering, and promote flourishing.
- Try to create a *facial expression of compassion*.
- Pay *attention to your body* as you bring each part of your compassionate self to the fore. Say:
  - *"I care about my pain."*
  - *"May I be happy."*
  - *"May I be healthy."*
  - *"May I be free of suffering."*
  - *"May I have a calm, gentle, and loving mind."*

### Compassion Flowing Out

- Sit quietly and *focus on your soothing breathing rhythm*.
- *Recall a time* when you felt very caring and kind towards someone (or an animal).
- Pay *attention to your body* as you create feelings of kindness.
- *Focus on someone you care about*, and direct toward them your desire that they be free of suffering and flourish.
- Keep in mind that it is your *intention that is important* – and the feelings may follow on behind. Say:
  - *"May you be happy."*
  - *"May you be healthy."*
  - *"May you be free of suffering."*

### Compassion Flowing into Your Self

- Engage with your *soothing breathing rhythm* and compassionate expression; bring to mind your safe place, the sounds, the feel, and the sights.
- This is your place and *it delights in your being there*.
- Now create and meet your *compassionate image* – it may be a divine or human being, a tree, an animal, the sun, or a mountain.
- The image may *appear from mist* or the blue sky or be walking towards you.
- Your perfect image of a compassionate being has the *following qualities*:
  - *A deep commitment to you* – a desire to help you heal, cope with and relieve your suffering.

- *Wisdom* – which comes from understanding that we all just find ourselves here, having to cope with a brain we did not design and early life experiences that shaped us that we did not choose, and doing the best we can.
- *Strength of mind* - this being is not overwhelmed by your pain or distress, but remains present, enduring it with you.
- *Warmth* – conveyed by kindness, gentleness, caring and openness.
- *Acceptance* – never critical or judgmental and understands your struggles.
- Focus on *experiencing what it's like to feel that another being really values you and cares about you unconditionally.*
- Your compassionate ideal is looking at you with great *warmth, wishing for you to flourish.*
- The key to the experience is not visual clarity, but to *focus on and practice the compassionate feelings.*
- Remember that what we are trying to tackle is your own attitudes towards yourself and your *ability to soothe yourself*, thus reducing your dependency on external sources or other people to help you to feel safeness and well-being.

### Compassion Under the Duvet

- Try to *practice "becoming your compassionate self"* each day.
- Start by learning "*compassion under the duvet*" (or in the bath or standing at the bus stop).
- As you lie in bed, bring a compassionate expression to your face, focus on your *real desire* to be wise and compassionate; remember inside you, you have the capacity for wisdom and strength, but you have to *create space* for it.

### An Example

Let's imagine you've had a setback like bingeing, or you have put on weight; here are some of the procedures you might use:

- *Validate the distress*; you are helped to be sensitive to, and be empathic to your distress (but not self-pitying) before trying to work with it; this is very important because you may try to dismiss it, minimize it, tell yourself to pull yourself together, or be angry that you are not coping.
- You will learn *emotional tolerance and acceptance* without avoidance or "fighting with myself to try to force control"; explore the value of mindfulness.
- Recognize self-criticism as understandable but unhelpful; seeing *behind* the criticism to *the fears and sadness's*; then developing compassion for those
- Prepare yourself to engage with the inner distress or self-criticism with your *soothing breathing rhythm.*

- *Refocus attention* on what would be helpful and supportive in this situation, for example bringing to mind memories of previous successes or of people's support, or of your compassionate self or of compassionate images.
- *Imagine your compassionate self-dealing with this issue.*
- Recognize (self-critical) rumination as understandable and a common process but *recognize the value of refocusing* on becoming a compassionate self.
- Imagine your compassionate self being compassionate to your self-criticism and the fears and sadness's that are often part of the self-criticism; engage in rumination for a few moments and then go through the "becoming a compassionate self-exercise" and *note the changes.*
- Explore *how you would speak to a friend* – but spend time enabling you to feel what you're saying rather than just attending to the content.
- Write a *compassionate letter.*
- Refocus using *compassionate images*; imagine yourself in a dialogue with a compassionate image.

Another way to develop your compassionate thinking is to explore the ways you normally think when you are in a particular mind-set. Jot down the thoughts you have when you are in a dieting mind-set.

Gently explore these thoughts and see if you can develop compassionate alternatives by using your compassionate mind to try to answer the following questions:

- *Is this thinking helpful to me?*
- *Would I think like this if I weren't in this (comfort-eating, dieting, food-as-fun) mind-set?*
- *Would I teach a child or friend to think like this?*
- *If not, how would I like to teach a child or friend to think about these things?*
- *How might I think about this when I am at my compassionate best? What would help me in the long run?*
- *Is this thinking compassionate?*

This booklet on Overeating is also available electronically on my website. To download this booklet as well as a collection of other booklets and CD's, please visit my website – [www.susankriegler.com](http://www.susankriegler.com) - or scan the QR Code below. If you would like to schedule an appointment, please contact my reception.

-Susan-

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