

SELF-WORTH APPROACH TO WEIGHT LOSS

INTRODUCTION

Dieting is one of the world's leading industries. No longer just in the Western world, it seems that the more affluent we become, the more we cannot stop eating. Nor does our capacity to eat healthily seem to depend on education or awareness; usually people are already cognisant of the health risks that their daily diet entails. Even as we place that packet of biscuits in the supermarket trolley, we vaguely sense that this might not be a smart move.

So, what's going on? If we already know all about carbs and sugar and exercise, what's missing?

EMPTINESS WITHIN

The basic thesis of this approach is that the core issue lies not in what we are eating, but in **why** we are eating it. The term "comfort eating" comes close to this core truth: we eat to fulfil emotional (even quasi-physical) needs that are inside of us. For example,

- A feeling of drudgery: food as reward or incentive
- Feeling tired, needing a lift
- Feeling empty or bored: food as diversion or distraction or excitement
- In need of physical affection: food as substitute for love
- Life that lacks sweetness, craving for sugar

These are just examples: you can easily extend the list. Try to find at least three triggers that apply to you.

Conventional diets do sometimes draw attention to these triggers above, but the reflection usually stops there. At this point, the advice usually turns to tactics about being mindful during vulnerable times, or to tips about how to get these needs met elsewhere. We are going to go a level deeper: as this is where the crux of the issue often lies.

THE LINK WITH SELF-WORTH

That sugar craving could be satisfied by an orange.... So why does it need to be a slice of cake? Usually, because cake has become a part of our reward/pleasure system. Even if we have cloaked ourselves with an entire gourmet tradition – or high-quality cuisine culture – we have often made food into something much more than a necessity of survival. For some people, food is literally part of their identity. It's part of what makes life worth living. A day without cake is.... just miserable... in a way that a day without oranges is unlikely ever to be.

Food is literally fulfilment. Not just physically, but at the level of feeling and pleasure. At the level of life itself. It's a celebration of everything that is worthwhile. It's hardly surprising that we head for the kitchen when we need a "fix". In savouring those chips or chocolates, we are affirming our right to be here.

Telling someone that they shouldn't is not only pointless: it's entirely missing the point that takes them into the kitchen (or sweet shop) in the first place. They go there to reconnect to themselves, not just to



the fridge. For a few fleeting moments – until self-reproach kicks in – they savour their self-worth in the pleasurable act of enjoying their fix. And when the self-reproach does come to mind, they finish the packet in order to drive it away.

A BETTER APPROACH

If someone is to break out of an unhealthy cycle of eating, I believe they need to begin with a revised understanding of self-worth, not with more (doomed) resolutions about eating. The food is not the problem. It's the emptiness within needs to be dealt with.

If you can become conscious that each craving is a recall to **you** – not just to the fridge – then you are well on your way towards a new relationship with food. Sometimes, you will indeed enjoy some biscuits (or whatever your “go to” pleasure is). But you can now choose that freely – as an expression of self-worth, and not another condition of self-esteem. Equally, you might also...

- Get a glass of water (as I'm doing now while writing this)
- Go for a 10min walk
- Play some music
- Call a friend

Isn't this just the same as what the diet books say? Not at all, the diet book is all about the food: this approach is all about you! It's not just about switching your **attention** – it's about changing your **intention**.

A self-worth approach to weight-loss is not saying: Lose weight and therefore feel good about you. On the contrary, it challenges you to feel good about you right now, and then (if you still want to, and it's not just another imposed “should” in your life) do something about your eating.

THE DAMAGE DONE BY SELF-ESTEEM

Much of our current obesity is co-related with rising expectations of ourselves. Show me any culture where people are obliged to think well of themselves all the time, and I will guarantee you will find rising levels of obesity. We've seen this for decades in the USA and we are now seeing the same rising levels of obesity in Asia.

It's ironic. The more we are obligated to be slim, ripped, busty, fashionable, successful, sociable, hyper-connected, balanced, even “spiritual” ... then the more the inner cravings seem to be rampant.

I've known from personal experience that trying to chase self-esteem via dieting is a losing game. Though I might sometimes succeed for a few weeks or maybe months, old habits soon returned. Looking back on those years, I can now clearly see why. The more conditional my self-esteem was – in this case, conditional on losing kilos or looking slim or being fit – the more insecure I felt inside. Sooner or later, this emptiness would break through and I would find a reason to comfort-eat.

Society's emphasis on self-esteem is not curing obesity – it's making the problem worse. To break a pattern of comfort-eating, we need to address the hollowness inside i.e. the fundamental issues of self-worth that lead to over-eating in the first place. We are not going to resolve these issues by still more exhortations or “should”s in life.

APPLYING THE SELF-WORTH SHIFTS

The following table sums up the seven Safari shifts, as these apply to issues of food. No diets, no calorie-counting, no starvation! What matters is a new basis for friendship with ourselves.

Shift	Tips
1. From assessing to asserting	Stop using the scales, at least daily Stop all assessments of yourself: even the positive ones that start “At least, I did/didn’t...” Start doing simple things you enjoy Start drinking more water, with a conscious thought of “I am worth it” or similar
2. From condition to expression	Whatever you do (even eating) take conscious pleasure from each bite. Do not multitask while eating: savour your food as an expression of friendship with yourself. Take whatever actions you wish – as an expression of self-worth, rather than a condition of self-esteem. This shift in intention is quite transformative.
3. From self-reproach to self-acceptance	Fully accept your shape, weight, size as it is today. This may change later, but that change will be forever postponed without a basis in self-worth. Notice feelings of guilt or shame when they arise, and start challenging the reality behind these.
4. From self-evaluation to usefulness	Cease looking for gratitude, recognition, visibility in both personal and work relationships. Focus on how your talents may be useful.
5. From “should” to “could”	End the use of the word “should” in anything to do with food or exercise. By all means, imagine what you could do.... And do it if you choose to do so!
6. From “proving oneself” to “valuing oneself”	As you get in touch with self-worth, precisely as you are today, there is nothing you need to prove. So, choose clothes, food and activities with the motive of valuing their person that you are: not proving yourself.
7. From “being interesting” to “being interested”	When meeting friends, practice being interested in them, rather than being aware of how you are “performing” or measuring up in their eyes.

MORE?

You may wish to redo the Self-Worth Stocktake after a few weeks of practicing the Safari shifts. Alternatively, if you would like to talk to someone and get individual coaching, feel free to email me, or any of the Self-Worth Academy associates: John@SelfWorthAcademy.com

If you are a wellness or healthcare practitioner, who would like deepen the dimension of self-worth with your clients, or offer support to others, we are particularly keen to hear from you.