eating to lose

healing from a life of diabulimia

Maryjeanne Hunt
Eating to Lose

Healing from a Life of Diabulimia

Maryjeanne Hunt
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Dedicated to Travis and Taylor, whose existence has made healing the only choice.
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Foreword

Research shows that approximately 30 percent of women with Type 1 Diabetes restrict insulin during their lifetimes. While a smaller percentage of these women could be diagnosed with a clinical eating disorder, women with Type 1 Diabetes have over twice the risk of developing an eating disorder than women without diabetes.

Insulin restriction is a problem unique to Type 1 Diabetes in which the patient intentionally takes less insulin than prescribed, which induces high blood sugars usually to purge calories and lose weight. Insulin restriction places patients with Type 1 Diabetes at increased risk for diabetic ketoacidosis, a medical crisis that can be fatal. It is also associated with earlier onset and higher rates of long-term medical complications of diabetes such as retinopathy, nephropathy, and neuropathy, as well as increased risk of early mortality.

In the last several years, this problem has been dubbed “Diabulimia” by the mainstream media. Mental health professionals often disagree with the use of this term and instead refer to it as the dual diagnosis of eating disorders and Type 1 Diabetes. Regardless of what we call it, media attention has helped to raise awareness of this important women’s health issue. Now that patients and health care providers have a way of understanding it and terms to call it, it is my sincere hope that more of those who are struggling will be able to access appropriate help. Patients tell me that, until recently, they had no idea that others shared this problem. Too often, I have been told that even when these women tried to seek treatment, they either could not find it or that it did not address the connections between their eating disorder and their diabetes.

My treatment of these patients has taught me that recovery is possible but involves the hard work of changing their relationship with food, insulin and diabetes management, and their worries about weight. Recent research actually confirms that recovery occurs in conjunction with decreasing

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fears that achieving healthy blood sugar ranges will automatically result in weight gain. In fact, the women who improved their blood sugars typically stabilized their weight, while those who continued to restrict insulin often gained weight.

_Eating to Lose_ fills an important need for women with Type 1 Diabetes, who have long felt that they were struggling alone with insulin restriction. Maryjeanne Hunt’s personal story provides one more hopeful example that recovery can happen. This is her unique story about her journey toward wellness. Each woman’s process will be her own, but they will all share the common goal of working hard to improve their long-term health and present-day quality of life.

Ann Goebel-Fabbri, PhD
_Assistant Professor of Psychiatry_
_Harvard Medical School_

**Behavioral and Mental Health Unit**
_Joslin Diabetes Center_
_1 Joslin Place_
_Boston, MA 02215_
Introduction

In 1980, there were fewer than six million people in the United States living with diabetes. I was one of them. I was diagnosed with the disease in 1971. By 2004, the number of Americans with diabetes had grown to nearly 16 million. Just four years later, that number climbed to 23.6 million. Today, at 25.8 million strong, the diabetes epidemic is costing our country over $200 billion dollars a year in healthcare expenses, and is expected to cost $3.4 trillion by the end of this decade, making it one of the most urgent public health issues of our time (American Diabetes Association, January 26, 2011; United Health, November 23, 2010).

Insulin is the cornerstone for treating Type 1 Diabetes. According to the American Diabetes Association, diabetic women are nearly three times more likely to develop an eating disorder than non-diabetic women. An estimated 30-40 percent of female teens and young adults with Type 1 Diabetes have developed or will develop an eating disorder. Once again, I was one of them. Diabulimia, as the disorder is known today, is the dangerous and often fatal practice where an individual with Type 1 Diabetes alters or omits insulin for the purpose of weight loss. I’m no mathematical genius, but it seems to me, that translates to a whole lot of American people not living the American Dream!

Diabetes is a disease where the pancreas, one of the body’s organs, discontinues insulin production. Insulin is the body’s only means of turning sugar into usable energy. No insulin means no energy—for anything from healing and growing to thinking and running. Without insulin, we cannot survive for very long. Non-diabetic people produce insulin automatically,
but those with Type 1 Diabetes (Juvenile Diabetes) must inject insulin into their bodies to stay alive.

In the absence of adequate insulin, glucose (sugar) accumulates in the blood. It is necessary for our bodies to have a certain amount of sugar in our blood so that it can supply energy to the cells in our bodies as needed. A normal (non-diabetic) blood sugar range is 80 ml/dl—120 ml/dl. Since this is not a textbook, it’s not necessary to know more precisely what these numbers represent, only that they are the ideal range.

When sugar accumulates in the blood, the non-diabetic body knows to signal the pancreas to produce appropriate amounts of insulin to keep it in the ideal range. The non-diabetic pancreas is quite intelligent and does this all on its own. When excess sugar accumulates in the blood of a person with diabetes because the dose of insulin is either insufficient or nonexistent, the diabetic body produces ketones, which use up the body’s fat for energy at a much faster rate than calorie restriction and/or exercise.

I know what you’re thinking: If you’re like most women in this country who put weight loss right up there with love and money, ketones probably sound like a dieter’s panacea! Well, they are . . . . and they’re not. You see, in addition to rapid fat-loss, the body also loses muscle tissue and fluid pretty quickly too. The entire process, called diabetic ketoacidosis, is a potentially life-threatening condition that produces high concentrations of toxins in the blood and causes extreme vomiting and intense dehydration. Still sound like a dream-come-true?

On the other hand, when the blood sugar drops too low—like when a meal has been skipped or delayed, exercise was more vigorous than planned, or when the insulin dose happened to be too high for the conditions of the time—quick acting carbohydrates like table sugar, fruit juice, or candy become an urgent life-saving remedy.

Okay, that’s it . . . . for now. I’m not a doctor and you’re probably not studying to be one. Here’s the bottom line: While most people achieve weight loss by eating less, I was able to achieve the same goal by eating more, as long as I remained ‘diligent’ about off-setting a binge with an omission of insulin.
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Body Image Setup

The Green Dress

Mirror, mirror on the wall . . . for some of us, this not-so-innocent sheet of reflective glass draws you to it like an unkind magnet, attaching itself to you, insisting its truth upon you. It can become so connected to you that you strangely grow overprotective of its cruelty, addicted to every glimpse of imperfection it reveals.

For my eighth grade self, the day this common household wall-hanging echoed back to me an image that more closely resembled a cylinder of Pillsbury crescent rolls about to burst out of their airtight packaging than a twelve-year-old girl desperate for a single morsel of affirmation, was the day it crossed over to the other side. The war between the mirror and me had begun.

I can still see that image perfectly. I had just squeezed every piece of my body into a second-hand dress I had borrowed to wear to my cousin’s wedding. I can recall every single detail of that dress. How unforgiving it had been to my preadolescent body—the Kelly green jersey fabric draped down my expanding middle, the pink and black appliqué elastic struggling to clench my underdeveloped chest. It made me look so . . . so . . . Oh, what the heck, there’s no other way to say it: UGLY!

“Mom, I hate this one! It makes me look . . . fat!” To this point, I had never been fat a day in my life. I was the one that kids made fun of for being too skinny. It had been a shocking revelation.
“You just look a little . . . ummm . . .” Mom paused to search for the right word, “chunky,” she finally admitted.

Chunky! Was that supposed to make me feel better? What did that mean? Maybe something like, ‘You’re not exactly fat; you’re just . . . um . . . kinda fat.’ Or like, ‘Let’s just find a more palatable word for the truth.’ Or better yet, ‘Let’s just bury the truth inside a whole bunch of euphemisms.’

That “truth” as I saw it would become the beginning of my education on the intimate link between food, calories, body image—and balance.

Adolescence marks a time of rapid and intense emotional and physical changes, for all children. There is an increased value placed on acceptance by friends and a heightened attention to social messages about cultural norms and body image.

The Four-Letter Word

I was a skinny child until eighth grade. Then I suppose nature decided it was about time I started to develop a few female curves. But that wasn’t how I saw it. The curves seemed to happen in all the wrong places. And my developing body bore no resemblance to those perfect models in the fashion magazines and television commercials of the seventies. Why couldn’t I look more like them?

But oh how privileged I was to have an in-house “expert” at my disposal. You see, through my entire childhood Mom, the world’s greatest authority on dieting, ate meals that were different from the meals she served to the rest of the family. I suppose I must have surmised in my naiveté that she simply had a particular affinity for broiled fish and spinach or plain skinless chicken breast and broccoli. What other explanation could there have been for her limited menu choices while the rest of us got to feast on spaghetti and meatballs or roast beef and baked potatoes smothered in butter, or better yet, Rosetti’s pizza?

But somewhere between sandboxes and prom dresses, I learned the meaning of the word “diet,” and that Mom ate this way because she was always on one. She never allowed us to witness her eating dessert with the rest of us, unless of course it happened to be one of those rare occasions when she gave herself permission to “cheat” (a word that I’ve finally learned never belongs in the same sentence as “food”). As long as I can remember, my mom had “just five more pounds to lose.” In those days, I saw her as the
rock star of diet savvy. So when it was time for me to shed a few pounds, her guidance was indeed a welcome commodity.

As a fourteen-year-old with diabetes, I learned to like cottage cheese with pineapple and a few Grapenuts sprinkled over the top in place of hot fudge sundaes, and dry tuna (hold the bread) instead of burgers with the fixings. I became a walking encyclopedia of calories, fat grams, and carbs. Salad became my best friend, and hot fudge sundaes, French fries, and pizza, my enemies. And yes, if I was feeling especially underprivileged, I got to “cheat” too. And then? I got to feel guilty for days later.

D-I-E-T. It’s all about The Bad List. Once you deny yourself something, you crave it—physically, mentally, or both. The whole process becomes a negative one. More focused on what you’re not supposed to eat for the next umpteen days, weeks, or months, than what you’re allowed to savor—guilt-free (well, at least according to this particular system of food regulation)—you struggle to remain faithful to your new set of eating rules.

Putting your daughter on a diet, even if she’s overweight, can damage her relationship with food or distort her body image which may increase her risk of developing an eating disorder later in life.

Ah yes, the rules. NO pizza. NO brownies. NO potato chips. You love pizza and brownies and potato chips but you can give them up for just two weeks, right? Because if you do, you will lose ten pounds. And if you lose just ten pounds, you will finally be pretty enough. And pretty enough will most assuredly lead to happy enough. Of course, it’s worth two weeks of no pizza and brownies and potato chips, right? But for the entire two weeks, all you can think about is pizza and brownies and potato chips.

Then the diet is finally over (if you make it). So what do you do? Drive yourself straight to the pizza place and order a large double cheese with a jumbo-sized bag of the saltiest, crispiest, greasiest chips. Then on the way home, you stop at the bakery to buy a box of brownies. And the best part? You don’t have to share any of it. You deserve it, after all. You made it two whole weeks without a single bite of your three favorite foods. . . .

So let’s just say you don’t cave into temptation and you actually do make it through the entire dark woods of denial. You arrive at the edge of the wood with triumph decorating your shoulders. What does your trophy look like? It was supposed to look like your old Barbie doll or that perfect
woman on the toothpaste commercial, right? That was the promise you bought into. The pledge of the body you’ve envisioned for yourself at last finally a reality. And you have made that magic happen with nothing but shear willpower. Why do you do it? Well, of course, it’s because once you finally lose that weight, you’re going to look better, feel better, date more, buy nicer clothes, and be happy. Life will be just perfect.

If only . . .

I wouldn’t learn until much later that if you begin to move more than you munch, just a little more, almost every day, eat a little less of the foods that I used to call the “devil’s gifts” and a lot more of those colorful ones that grow in the ground (you know, God’s gifts), you inadvertently begin to find yourself celebrating what’s right with the world instead of whining about what’s wrong with your body before you even notice you’ve lost a single pound. And even better: you don’t have to push visions of pizza and brownies out of your head, because they never even knocked to get in! That’s what I call the win-win approach to reconciliation between food and body image. Seamless. Effortless. Sensible. No-brainer! If I’d only known when I was fourteen what I know now.

Ah, the great game of deprivation endurance.

Deprivation-based diets are the raw material for short-term success stories—and long-term wars with mirrors and food and your thighs and belly. I have the battle-scars to prove it. Making intelligent and sensible choices about food most of the time (notice I said, “most,” not “all”), making exercise as routine as brushing your teeth, are the only ways to manage body woes for a lifetime. Well, that’s what I thought I’d figured out by the time I hit thirty anyway.

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**Speaking From Experience: Inspirations to Invite Healing**

- **D-I-E-T!**
  Diet: (noun) the food eaten in a particular species or culture; (verb) to follow a pattern of restricting food in order to lose weight. . . .

  To diet or not to diet—that is the question. Dieting has practically become a national sport. I keep wondering when they’re going to enter it into the Olympics! I’m referring to the verb form. You know, to restrict, reduce, control, sometimes even eliminate—food.

  Food. What a substance. What a paradox! For so many of us it is simultaneously sustenance and poison. It is fuel, reward, celebration,
comfort; then it is venom, torment, anguish. Practically omnipotent, it is capable of transforming a mundane meeting at work into a festive gala, suffocating every last stressful detail of the overflowing inbox of life, filling up emptiness with rich pleasure, and sadness with pure delight . . . or is it?

We overindulge; we under-indulge. We deprive, restrict, deny and punish ourselves until . . . we disintegrate.

• **Obsession**
  When we fixate on something—anything—we amplify it. It swells up bigger than an Eiffel Tower-sized Hershey’s kiss. What do diets do? They make us fixate on the very thing we are so desperate to stop noticing. They insist images of delectable, mouth-watering, guilty pleasures onto our poor impressionable helpless brains. So what happens? Food becomes larger than life. Or worse—food becomes life.

  Diets do the opposite of what we want them to do. They tip the scales so far out of balance that we completely lose sight of the fact that there’s a whole world of wonderfulness beyond the refrigerator. And then, when life is only about what goes into our mouths, we disappear and we become our bodies. Does that sound like balance to you?

• **Good List—Bad List**
  It seems our species is hardwired to pigeonhole everything in life into distinctly separate slots labeled either “good” or “bad”—strength is good, weakness is bad; laughter is good, tears are bad; wealth is good, poverty is bad; pleasure is good, pain is bad; simplicity is good, difficulty is bad; knowledge is good, ignorance is bad; relationship is good, solitude is bad; clarity is good, confusion is bad.

  Exercise is good—calories are bad. Broccoli, salmon, and berries are good—brownies, fried dough, and milk shakes are bad.

  What if I told you the only place that “good” and “bad” truly exist is in the mind? What if I were to say it’s only about “balance” and “imbalance”?

  Here’s a short exercise that has helped me to rethink some of my preconceived notions of good versus bad when it comes to food. Perhaps you’ll find it helpful too. I target a food that once would have only appeared on the “Bad List” and look for a way it might be
permitted onto the “Good List.” I consider its merits. “Delicious” is usually the first thing I come up with. Then I take that word “delicious” and I ask myself what could possibly be wrong with “delicious”? In and of itself, is it not okay to experience “delicious”? Well, okay then, if “delicious” is not wrong, then what is? Calories? Sugar? Maybe, but it would depend on the conditions. Even calories and sugar have a proper place. Calories are energy. We can’t survive without them. Everyone knows that. And what about sugar? As anyone with diabetes knows, sugar can be a superhero in the face of acute low blood glucose. So if sugar has merit, it can’t be all bad, right? Drilling down further, I unequivocally isolate the true demon responsible for its position on the Bad List. It always comes down to one thing—imbalance.

Now you try it. What do your answers to these questions tell you about your relationship with food?