



art Jamie Russell

“Getting into shape has more to do with what’s going on in our head, life and toxic food, weight and appearance obsessed culture than diet and exercise.”

Me

Emotional about food

by Janine Browne

During my time working in the health and fitness industry I’d often hear colleagues questioning with much frustration; “Why can’t my clients just eat less and do the damn exercises?”

Contrary to common belief, weight ‘problems’ are often NOT due to lack of will power and nutritional knowledge, but are a result of much deeper, emotionally and culturally driven issues.

Weight ‘problems’ (be it excessive weight gain or loss) can be a response to some form of personal struggle or pain—issues like stress; feeling down; grief; body and self image issues; illness; relationship problems; physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse.

Eating behaviours and choices are also strongly influenced by peer and cultural pressure; beliefs and traditions; mass media; and the abundance of food and food choices that are constantly ‘in our face’ and accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Resisting the pull of this alone can be an enormous challenge in itself.

Food can also be like a drug - an addictive one at that. Eric Harrison (Director of the Perth Meditation Centre) describes how pleasure works like meditation;

“At the moment your teeth pierce the skin of the nectarine and the juice spills over your tongue, where are your problems then? This small moment of ecstasy takes you out of yourself.”

Add to this, the other situations where food is a traditional part of the ‘feel good’ experience—the parties; celebrations; holidays; Christmas; Easter; you begin to get a ‘big picture’ view of what people are up against when trying to change eating behaviours and building a better relationship with food—why it’s such a major health issue.

My story on page 2, shares a deep and personal insight into, and understanding of, the intimate relationship between what’s going on in our heads and lives and our relationship with food.

Six years ago I was caught in a cycle that sent my mental and physical health crashing. It was a cycle of feeling down; comfort eating on high fat and sugar foods; drinking heavily; stacking on the weight which made me feel too self conscious and energy zapped to exercise; which further contributed to my bad feelings; so I'd eat more and around I'd go again.

Breaking this cycle meant doing some relationship counseling with food and my sense of 'self', not going a diet. What and how much I ate was essentially an indicator of what was happening in my life, how I felt about myself. When I felt bad or was going through a tough time, I wanted to move out of that space. I sought refuge in food, it soothed my bad feelings, made me feel good (whilst I was doing it). When I stopped eating, however, I felt bad again. In fact, I felt worse because of my "naughty, bad, fat pig" thoughts. Junk food and eating habits manifested into junk thoughts about myself, it was a self destructive cycle.

Food and alcohol became an addiction. Busting the habit meant gritting my teeth and enduring a period of extreme discomfort, withdrawals, cravings and more bad feelings. Some days I'd manage to keep it under control, others I didn't. It was a 'process' not a flick of a switch.

When I wasn't eating for comfort I was eating to punish myself. When I felt like junk, I ate junk. The more junk I ate the more I felt the need to punish myself for losing control, being weak, being a 'pig'. I'd say to my self; "Go on, you might as well eat the whole bloody lot now, you're so fat anyway!" It was a vicious cycle. I had to challenge the 'naughty, bad, fat pig' thoughts; and learn how to deal with my negative feelings in ways that weren't self destructive.

I also had to reduce the emotional torture I put myself through in relation to food and eating by taking responsibility for the choices I made. For example, if I'm not taking responsibility for what I eat, then my emotions do the decision making— like functioning on automatic pilot. If I believe these decisions are beyond my control (not my responsibility) then my head talk goes something like this: "Oh, I can't help it. I know I shouldn't but . . . this is really bad for me. I shouldn't eat this. Oh, just this once maybe. I won't do it again!"

I wasn't being a responsible adult, I was being a naughty child and I behaved like one. I'd shovel food in quickly (and hide the 'evidence'). Get it over and done with so I could delude myself that it didn't really happen— "Hey! Where did that chocolate bar go?" I'd eat secretly too— if no-one saw it, it didn't happen.

I think I was addicted to the naughtiness, the 'bad food', 'bad behavior', the risk taking, rebelling. I had to question who I was rebelling against though. This was about me, there was no-one else involved – no-one else to blame.

I had to start making mindful, conscious choices and cease the emotional torture. Reflect back on the choices I made, and think constructively (not destructively) about it. This mental process wasn't about denying myself the pleasure of eating chocolate, chips, take-away and food with minimal nutritional value, it's about eating mindfully, ensuring I'm making choices that for most of the time, are good for my body and that don't feed junk thoughts.

When I feel bad I challenge junk thoughts; "OK. So that wasn't such a great choice. Next time I need to stop at one row instead of eating the whole block! What's going to help me do this? What can I do next time?" This helps to eliminate the guilt, shame, anger and 'miserable-ness' associated with eating.

Out of control eating can be brought back into line by writing down what I eat for a few days, or until I'm back in control. Getting it out of my head and onto the page allows me to view it objectively and make constructive changes —leaving myself in tact during the process.

I'm still working on developing a better relationship with food. One where food is enjoyed and eaten consciously, for both nutrition and pleasure. One where I use food less to comfort emotional stress and find other (less self destructive) ways of coping. One that is not used as a form of punishment or as something I deny myself to meet imposed ideals. I try to keep the focus on my relationship with, and behaviour around food, rather than focusing on the food itself—the calories and fat content.

My 'diet' ('diet' referring to what I eat not what I restrict) is based on endeavoring to eat food that is good for my physical and emotional health—not declaring war on the foods that aren't. Making something 'bad' or out of reach elevates it's status, gives it more power.

See below for some ideas that can help build a better relationship with food.



art. Janine Browne

1. Don't just eat - dine

- Shift the focus to creating a more pleasurable relationship with food as opposed to the restricting of pleasure through punitive diets.
- 'Dining' is a conscious act, treating myself as a special guest at the dinner table. It's a sensuous ritual, one that takes time and gives pleasure, embraces food with appreciation and respect.
- 'Eating' is more of an automatic response to emotional and physiological cues. I endeavor to 'dine' more and 'eat' less. Eat less meals off the fridge or pantry shelf, from the drive-through or in secret. Dine more on home cooked meals; at a table set with candles and flowers; where warm conversations are shared. Dining is eating consciously, savoring the pleasure of each mouthful (eating without the distraction of TV).

2. Create a non-toxic food environment - being a critical consumer

- Limit things that influence and impact on what, how and how much I eat. For example, TV viewing. I avoid commercial stations or at least mute the ads or channel surf to avoid them. It's an interesting exercise to tally up how many food ads appear during the time you're watching television. It's empowering to identify and challenge what's influencing our eating behaviour. Do this exercise during kids TV shows and it's really disturbing to see what food companies are 'feeding' our kids.

- Challenge or avoid mass media (beauty magazines, TV shows) that depict the glorification of slimness and the horrification of fat; or contain food advertising.
- Shop at small fruit and vege markets, the local butcher and bakery. In doing this I avoid the 'assault' by food and product manufacturers at large supermarkets—and those overwhelming, confused, frenzied, frazzled feelings that are sparked by the over abundance of products and choices.
- Plan ahead and shop less frequently to avoid the above.

3. Have realistic expectations

Building a better relationship with food isn't about reaching a place of absolute purity—old habits die hard. The origins and ingrained beliefs that form and influence my relationship with food go back a long way so I don't expect the change to be quick and easy. Sometimes I manage it well, sometimes I don't but that's part of the relationship building, it's not something I need to beat myself up about.

I have to respect and take personal responsibility for my body. I accept that I will have to remain vigilant and mindfully engaged in the life long journey of improving my relationship with not only food, but also my body and sense of 'self'.