

## Dang That Dr. Phil!

Discussions of Dr. Phillip McGraw and his ideas about dieting often arise in lowcarb forums. I especially remember one lady, a consistent on-again-off-again, chronically stalled lowcarber, who talked about her frustration with Dr. Phil's method of first trying to get to the heart of her eating behavior before she could properly change it: "I need to find out why I keep falling off the wagon and gaining back what I lose. It's not just because I like the taste of cookies better than I like the taste of broccoli."

I know it sounds like a new-age riddle, but she keeps falling off the wagon BECAUSE she keeps falling off the wagon.

Only if you look at this from the addiction paradigm does it make some sense. I really like Dr. Phil, and I don't believe he is wrong at all about there being some complex issues underneath which we eventually might need to face. But I believe that for many of us, his solution is basically backwards. I suspect he fails to completely appreciate the strength of the physical hold foods can have on some of us, and I suspect this is true of the vast majority of overweight people, which makes it virtually impossible to do it the most popular way he says we need to: by basing our recovery primarily on new *understanding*.

Would Dr. Phil tell a heroin addict to go ponder the meaning of his life until, by some miracle, the answer(s) come to him and that THEN he'll miraculously be able to effortlessly quit? I don't think so.

First the addict has got to quit and STAY off drugs. The behavior has got to change and stay changed **first**. He's got to abstain not just from heroin, but from other substances that could eventually trigger him back to heroin. And he has to abstain even AFTER he figures out the reasons why, if there were any. Because truthfully, whether there are hidden, dark, deep-seated, even horrifying reasons inside him doesn't matter! Because of his physical issues with drugs, he's still gonna have to go through life without them, just like we've got to go on living without our drug-foods. Because the addiction, even if it has a psychological component, is also physical.

In my opinion, ONLY if the woman I spoke of stops eating "the cookies" (as opposed to trying to choose day by day, hour by hour, when she can and cannot, or even postponing eating them until after she's "done"), and eats only "the broccoli," until she can just FIND a way to keep to that behavior no matter what else is going on inside and outside her, *eventually* she may come to see all of the deeper-seated reasons why she ate the cookies, why she kept falling off the wagon. Thus, only if we stop falling off the wagon might we see the reasons why we couldn't stop falling off the wagon. Maddeningly simple, isn't it?

My own reasons literally hit me in the face one day during a walk in June 2000, 19 months after I changed my eating behavior to total abstinence, 9 months after I got to

goal. I see now that until then, the continuous hard work of abstinence, the day-to-day tasks of exercising and staying prepared and one step ahead of every single eating decision, took almost all of my attention and energy. In a sense, eating right became its own temporary, substitute addiction until it just slipped into a habit, part of who I am.

In hindsight, I think that was a good thing, because until then I'm not sure I would have been strong enough to face my deepest-rooted problems without going back to using. It wasn't until I was slender, finally more in dietary and exercise cruise mode, just rolling along trying to stay that way, that the psychological stuff started bubbling up and out. It was just as Dr. Phil said—go back and look at everything that was going on in your life when you first got fat.

It was all there, it had never been hidden, I just didn't want to see it and put it all together. Although it isn't a particularly unusual or horrifying story—no laws were broken, no lives were lost or even created—it was scary as hell to me, and believe it or not, my feelings and frustrations about it haven't gone away, they've only calmed a little. I understand and accept now that they never will. I've simply learned to live with them, just FEEL them—and let them just sorta pass on through—when they resurface as they do in some form or another almost daily, without responding by eating, or doing anything to attempt to stop the flow or intensity of the feelings. They are just \*there\* sometimes.

It hasn't, and it won't, kill me. My life is not perfect, never has been, I am not perfect and my life, my choices and I never will be, EXCEPT for my eating choices. Because I am an addict, I do have to maintain sobriety from my drug-foods forever. Meanwhile, me and my crazy feelings and emotions, me and my imperfect self, we'll just keep bumbling through. Sure, it's a little painful, but it's a lot better this way than trying to run and hide from it all by escaping into a "mouth party" as Dr. Phil so aptly calls it.

Now of course the trouble with food vs. heroin addiction is we all gotta eat! But what food addicts don't have to eat are drug-foods. Drug-foods are really pretty easy to separate from the rest, and unfortunately there are many lowcarb drug-foods, and gateway or trigger drug-foods. And probably the most common pattern in long-term stalled lowcarbers is that, like me, they get stuck somewhere between eating a lot better than they used to, but still using when things get emotionally challenging. It's this "using hump" most of us just can't seem to get ourselves over.

But there really is an easy, fairly clear-cut difference: Straight, simple, unprocessed meat, eggs and veggies cannot be used by anybody. Because they're boring. But that's exactly what makes them perfect for people like me who kept attempting to get something more from food than it was ever capable of delivering—a little rush, a buzz, a *don't listen to that quiet little voice, just enjoy this louder party in your mouth instead* mood.

With natural, no-frills food, we can eat but we cannot use. Oh and of course the other good news/bad-news thing about meat and veggies is that 99% of the time it makes

lowcarb work better so we start getting results which is often the first slightly daunting emotional experience to be reckoned with without resorting to drug-foods. Because we addicts struggle in varying degrees with ALL emotions—the "good" ones AND the "bad".

Sure, cookies would still taste better to me than broccoli, and they always will. Cheese and nuts taste better than olive oil and salad veggies. But I know now that is not the real reason I ate them. That's why many "normal" people can eat them, but not addicted eater me. Other people, maybe even other, more "lucky" lowcarbers, can handle life with or without cookies, they can take them or leave them, because they never got themselves as enmeshed physically and emotionally with drug-foods as I did. They can live a life of moderation, "controlling" their addiction, because for them it never quite really was one. They can eat the occasional "treat."

I can't.

But here's another bottom line: focusing on what others could or should do is utterly worthless to me. In this eating part of life, I simply need to stay focused only on ME. And after the struggles, after all the hard work, despite the "unfairness" of it all, after many many years without them, MY life tastes better and works better—WITH broccoli and WITOUT cookies.

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