

Growing Up Emotionally

Most of us who have problems with emotional eating, have developed a **behavior pattern** (in our case an addictive eating pattern), often, but not always, around the time of puberty, of stopping any unpleasant feelings or emotions dead in their tracks. By adulthood we've repeated and streamlined the **pattern** so flawlessly that we end up with almost no clue that we do this, or where, when, why, or how we began to do it. We simply don't go there: *I'm feeling vaguely uncomfortable, [cue inner sirens]: eat eat eat, something good, something DISTRACTING, now now now. STOP that feeling. DON'T GO THERE, I REPEAT DON'T GO THERE. Now eat some more to make sure it's down there GOOD!!*

Eventually this becomes an embedded **behavior pattern** that serves us in some surprisingly effective ways. Most importantly, I believe, it serves us into never going through the tumultuous and often painful process of maturing emotionally. Thus, we end up in our 30's, 40's and beyond, attempting to function emotionally more like 13-year-olds than emotionally-savvy adults.

Here are some traits of what I believe addicted binge-eaters, that is, "emotional 13-year-olds" have in common:

- We think we are "special", exceptional. We are often the center of our universe, prone to hyperbole, and a naïve sense of entitlement.
- We are often drama queens—overwrought and impatient. We are a prickly, hypersensitive bunch, masters at nursing grudges and "building a case" against anyone who says or behaves in any way "against" us or our notions of how things *should* be.
- Like 13-year-olds, when things are not going our way (which is the RIGHT way of course!), we tend to withdraw, sulk and brood unless/until they do.
- There is a whole lot of "should" in our thinking—about others and ourselves. We are idealistic and perfectionistic. We expect not just ourselves, but most everybody and every occasion and circumstance to conform to *our* notions of fair and perfect, and we can become righteously indignant when they don't. As part of this we have a strong tendency toward all-or-nothing thinking and behaving. "If I can't be exceptionally perfect, I might as well not even try. If I'm going to eat one slice of cake, I might as well eat the whole thing." "If I am going to tell someone off, I am going to REALLY let them have it."
- Our fear of rejection is often extreme and overwhelming. We feel an (unnecessary) OVER-responsibility to shape/control the feelings of others, especially their feelings about us, because in our tender, immature emotional state we cannot bear the even idea that anyone disapproves of or dislikes us.

- We concurrently fear and revere all kinds of authority. We resent and must therefore (often dramatically, if silently) rebel against it. Authority = control.
- We distrust, fear—hate!—most any kind of change unless WE (can) control it to a very large extent
- We are black and white. Emotions are gray. Emotions, especially strong ones, make us uncomfortable—sometimes make us crazy!—because they don't make sense, we can't control them and they will not stop CHANGING!

When we begin to examine all the unflattering inconsistencies in this **behavior pattern**, it can be VERY hard to swallow. It's uncomfortable to say the least, which of course brings us back around to the first step in this life-dance-**pattern** we think we want to curtail (which is at least PART of why it can be so daunting to stop—we cannot abide feeling “uncomfortable”). Nevertheless, until we slowly begin to get away from these **behavior patterns**, we will stay locked into them because they are all we know.

These **patterns** are a bad habit, but they are much EASIER than facing the ALL the discomforts of change, of developing new **patterns**. Heck, these **behavior patterns** are culturally encouraged now, mostly by the commercial media, and thus we absolutely can and do often “get away” with never growing up emotionally. We don't HAVE to change this. In fact, major industries are flourishing—fast food, cosmetic, weight loss, and of course the medical sector, to name a few—by literally banking on their ability to lure us into PURCHASING a “better” life (as in quick, easy and less painful—hopefully painLESS), by selling us their goods and services. It's actually kind of ingenious.

Moreover, it's possible that (gasp!) IT IS NOT OUR FAULT that we developed this **pattern**. We might have been raised by people who abused or took advantage of us emotionally for their own twisted or immature reasons, or merely by overly fearful, emotionally immature people themselves, those who believed that the best thing they could do for any child would be for her to never have to feel any pain—physical or emotional. So they well-meaningly took away our many opportunities to learn hard lessons.

I think an important preliminary truth and the most common stumbling block to even getting ourselves on the road to successfully changing these patterns is that the reasons—that is, the people (evil or well meaning) and circumstances which encouraged us to initiate this **behavior pattern**—don't matter much, especially not NOW. Some understanding probably will come in time but in my opinion this can't come FIRST. It's even possible—and totally okay—that we will never be able to completely (and perfectly!) understand them.

The only way to stop the negative consequences our **behavior pattern** brings is to stop the behavior. For quite a long time this will be a sometimes uncomfortable conscious choice, making decisions that will NOT be easy, convenient, quick or painless to implement in a culture that churns along on those buzz-words.

You've probably noticed that I've bolded the words **behavior pattern** here. That's because I think an important first step in the painfully SLOW dismantling of this whole cycle is to calm down our overwrought selves and recognize that this is **ONLY** a pattern. It doesn't define WHO we are, our worth as a human being or a child of God. It's not any kind of crime or sin (except perhaps against ourselves). It is something we can change when we are willing to do so.

Everybody wants. 13-year-olds especially, WANT. Everything. Desperately. The difference—and the reason why the huge majority of folks trying to stop this pattern do not succeed—is that so very few are WILLING to change permanently.

Being WILLING to change means being willing to face all kinds of ongoing social-emotional risks, isolation, and some fleeting discomfort. It can make family and friends uncomfortable because it requires us to sometimes behave “against the grain” (pun intended) socially, as well as to work hard “behind the scenes”, where nobody can see or appreciate how hard-working and thus how good and virtuous we are, to enforce and ensure our pattern changes.

That's what leading with abstinence IS. It is planning and executing a simple plan for ourselves that is sometimes puzzling and off-putting to others, which will sometimes cause some of them to reject us on some levels, temporarily or maybe even forever. Then we have to pick up the pieces and decide, sometimes over and over again, which pain—the pain of being overweight, sick, and out of control, or the pain of being a little different when it comes to food—we are willing to abide.

Emotional grown-ups really aren't all that different from 13-year-olds, we still have most if not all of the same emotions we had when we were 13. We merely learn how to handle them better—to sort them and respond to the important ones in mindful, appropriate ways. Emotional grown-ups realize that despite all our jumbled and conflicting feelings, despite the fair and unfair, we can't and will never “have it all,” and that wanting or deserving have little to do with anything—positive or negative.

We are entitled to the consequences of whatever behaviors we choose day after month after year.

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