

Week 2

Eating as Coping



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Week 2—Eating as Coping:

Developing Alternative Coping Strategies

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Week 2—Eating as Coping: Developing Alternative Coping Strategies

CUES FOR BINGE EATING

This is an important week in treatment because we cover much material that sets the stage for later sessions. In chapter 1 we reviewed the research findings and theoretical models that suggest that bulimic women have limited coping abilities and that binge eating is an ineffective and self-defeating coping response for most bulimics. The purpose of this session is to help women identify the cues that lead to binge eating for them and to develop other responses to these cues. We attempt to identify a woman's cues for binge eating by reviewing her binge diary at the beginning of the session. The cues are usually threefold: her feelings, her thoughts, and her excessive hunger due to starvation. After identifying these three types of cues for binge eating, we spend the rest of the session discussing alternative ways of coping. We discuss ways to deal with feelings more directly, to change self-defeating thoughts, and to develop better eating habits.

We start the session by reviewing the binge diaries and asking the women to tell us their thoughts and feelings prior to binge eating. This is frequently difficult for them to do, but with time they become better at identifying their thoughts and feelings. Eating for most of the women is a means of coping with stress. Some common emotional triggers for binge eating are boredom, loneliness, anger, and anxiety. Connie is typical of many women. She told the group, "It seems I eat just because I'm home alone. I don't even think about it. It's automatic. I go home, I'm alone, and that's a cue for me to eat. Whether it's boredom, loneliness, or habit I don't know." Other women binge while studying, "I think of all the work I have to do," said Celia, "and then all I think about is food. I feel so nervous." "This has been such a stressful week, so I eat just to relax and forget about it," said another. Some women binge when they look at other women and feel "fat" by comparison. Others eat as a means of avoiding difficult situations; still others eat when they are feeling angry.

Excessive hunger is also a trigger for binge eating. Ironically, the only time women eat out of hunger is when this hunger is excessive and caused by near starvation. A woman binges after being "good" all day and not giving the body what it needs. Many women do not feed their bodies because they do not realize how much they can eat and not gain weight.

They feel the least bit of food intake will result in immediate weight gain. In addition, the bulimic woman has no idea what her ideal weight is, and she strives to weigh less than she should according to her height and bone structure.

Thoughts also serve as cues for binge eating, and we help women identify what they are thinking. Frequently, these thoughts include statements such as, "I'm so nervous, I have to eat," or "Since I'm going to purge anyway, I might as well eat the whole thing," or "I'm going on a diet tomorrow, this is my last chance to eat."

ALTERNATIVE COPING RESPONSES

Changing Eating Habits

After helping women identify their cues for binge eating, we teach them alternative ways of coping. For example, a woman who eats after talking to her mother is encouraged to express her feelings about the conversation directly. A woman who eats out of boredom can take a walk, go to a movie, or read the paper. A woman who eats to console herself can ask for comfort from friends. In addition, some specific strategies can help many women change their cues for eating. For example, a woman who eats

when she is home alone studying can study at the library. Another woman who has an "uncontrollable urge" to eat can set a timer for 20 minutes and during this time polish her nails, vacuum, call a friend, or keep busy in a number of ways. Other strategies for confronting a binge can be suggested by the group members.

Although the main focus of the treatment program is on feelings rather than on food, we present some basic nutritional information because an insufficient familiarity with nutrition leads many women to binge. Learning good eating habits is one of the basic coping skills. We ask each woman to look at her recommended weight from the Metropolitan Height and Weight Table for Women (1983) because most set their ideal weight at least 10 or 20 pounds below these norms (see Table 4.1). We challenge the notion that every woman should weigh 103 lb and stress that they are trying to achieve unrealistic goals that are neither ideal nor healthy. Most women are surprised by this table and are reluctant at first to accept that they may already be within their weight range or lower. Some, however, realize that they may be putting excessive pressure on themselves to be thin, and that trying to live up to some unrealistic image of slimness only results in frustration and depression.

We also provide some basic information on how much they can eat and still maintain their weight. We review some of "Fat Facts" listed in Table 4.2 and encourage them to eat healthy and regular meals. In this session, we review a typical menu consisting of 1,320 and 1,488 calories daily needed to maintain weights of 110 lb and 124 lb, respectively, and demonstrate that women can eat three healthy meals and still maintain their weights. A menu for 1,320 calories is listed in Table 4.2 and other menus for 1,488 calories are listed in Table 4.3. We tell them not to weigh themselves daily and to use exercise rather than starvation to reduce. Many women are skeptical that they can eat so "much" and still maintain their weight, and they are frequently surprised that they do not become obese overnight by developing healthy eating habits.

We stress the importance of eating three meals a day because starvation and its accompanying feelings of deprivation invariably lead to binge eating. We state that starvation can lead to an increased interest and preoccupation with food, and bulimia can be a natural physiological consequence. We tell them that, in the long run, they lose weight much faster by developing a regular pattern. Many women resist this because they are afraid that they will gain weight overnight if they eat three meals a day. We generally deal with the fears by asking them to try it for 1 week.

After all, we point out, they are in the program to change their eating habits. We ask them to experiment by eating regularly for a week and seeing what happens.

We also ask them to make up their minds, at least for this week, not to purge after a binge, *no matter how much they have eaten*. If they generally vomit after a large meal, they may be using purging as an excuse to continue eating. They may say to themselves, "I might as well overeat since I am going to throw up afterwards." Many women cut down on the size of their binges once they know they are not going to get rid of the food.

We tell laxative abusers to throw out their laxatives after this session, as a commitment not to purge. We also give them some reading material that describes research findings on laxative use. These findings indicate that laxative use still results in 88% caloric absorption of the food, so laxatives are not an effective mechanism for losing weight (Bo-Linn, Santa Ana, Morawski, & Fordtran, 1983). It should be noted that very few of the women we saw used laxatives heavily or as the primary mode of purging.

With heavy laxative users, referral to a physician for supervised

tapering of laxatives is recommended. Because the main motivation for taking laxatives is to lose weight, clear demonstration of their ineffectiveness as a means of weight control generally results in discontinuing this practice. Compliance is also influenced by group pressure and the emphasis on taking responsibility for one's behavior.

I Cope

In addition to developing new eating habits as a coping response, we review some other coping skills to help the bulimic deal with feelings of stress prior to binge eating. The acronym I COPE² stands for some basic coping skills and contains ideas for stress management (see Table 4.4). In this acronym, I stands for Identifying stress, and each of the letters in the word COPE stands for a different stress skill: Communication, Organization, Perception, and Enhancement. We give an example of how this acronym can be applied to binge eating. A woman heading for the refrigerator as she is studying for a test can first *identify* her feelings. She may be feeling anxious, tired, or bored. She can then use one of the coping skills to deal with her stress. She can call a friend and discuss her feelings (*communication*), organize her material and feel more prepared (*organization*), see the test as a small part of her education rather than a

monumental task (*perception*), or exercise, relax, or nap to feel renewed (*enhancement*). After discussing the I COPE skills we ask each woman which of the skills will help her most.

Changing Thought Patterns

We also discuss the effect that our thinking has on our eating behavior and illustrate how women's negative monologues encourage binge eating. We provide examples from Table 4.5 and discuss how we can replace our negative monologues with more appropriate ones. This is similar to some of the methods described by Garner and Bemis (1982) in their work with anorexics. We try to elicit each woman's negative monologues and have her replace them with more positive ones. In each of the succeeding sessions, we discuss the negative thoughts women are "feeding" themselves as we review their binge diaries with them.

Many of the negative thoughts are typical of the overgeneralization and all-or-nothing thinking in which bulimics frequently engage. For example, Anne told herself, "If I gain 1 lb, I will go on and gain 20." We challenged the irrationality behind the thought by asking, "Why should you necessarily gain 20 lb if you gain a pound?" and asked her to replace her

negative monologue with a more appropriate one. Another example of overgeneralization is when a women tells herself, as Jackie did, "I blew it! I ate one cookie, and there goes my diet!" She can replace this with a more appropriate monologue such as "Why should one cookie blow it for me?"

We also challenge the notion that binge eating and purging are successful weight control methods. For example, Delores told herself, "I've discovered an easy way to diet." She was encouraged to change her thinking to "This is an easy way to die! I can lose my teeth, rupture my stomach, and hurt my kidneys." The notion that one can become attractive by purging to stay slim is also attacked. For example, Jackie told herself, "I'm going to vomit until I'm thin and pretty." We confronted her with the more realistic and unattractive thought that "Continuous vomiting will make my teeth fall out—that's not very attractive." That thinness will automatically result in popularity with the opposite sex is also challenged, as in Penny's case. Penny told herself, "If I'm thin and beautiful, then my boyfriend will want to spend more time with me." She learned to remind herself of the reality of her situation and change her monologue to "I'm always so worried that he'll discover 'my secret,' I don't even let myself enjoy the time with him."

The self-defeating rather than the reinforcing qualities of binges are also emphasized when changing negative monologues to more appropriate ones. For example, Connie frequently told herself, "I had a terrible day. I'll cheer myself up with food afterwards." She changed her thinking to "Think how terrible I will feel afterwards." Similarly, a woman who thinks "I am so nervous I have to eat," can remind herself that "Binge eating creates psychological problems—it doesn't get rid of them." In addition, other coping strategies are usually suggested in the new monologues. For example, a woman who tells herself she needs to binge because she is bored or tense can remind herself, "There are other ways to relax. Why not take a walk?"

After we discuss all the different coping responses, we ask each woman to focus on one new coping response for the following week. We enlist the aid of the group in generating some coping strategies for each woman. Sometimes, we make photocopies of the different coping responses developed by the group members and hand them out to each member at the next session.

This is a "packed" session, and we attempt to cover a great deal of material. Obviously we will not be able to have each woman identify all of

her triggers for binge eating and change her eating habits in one session. This session, however, lays the groundwork for future sessions, and we frequently repeat over and over the basic information provided here. This is a good time to schedule an individual session with each woman if she is part of a group, so that we can review her pattern in detail.

We also collect the binge diaries at this (and every) session so we can ensure that the women are filling them out properly, and we give them written feedback. Reviewing the diary is important for the therapist in understanding exactly what happens with each woman. In addition, it underscores for the client the importance of filling the diary out. If women "forget" or "do not want to write down" everything, we discuss the feelings behind the "forgetting."

For homework, we ask each group member to review the material on alternative ways to cope with stress and on nutrition and to develop her own list of coping responses. As noted before, we encourage her very strongly to eat three meals a day and to make a decision not to purge even if she binges. As she continues filling out the binge diary, we ask her to write in the third column alternative coping responses she can use the next time she is in a similar situation.

SUMMARY

1. Go over the homework, and help each woman identify her thoughts and feelings prior to binge eating. Write on the board the triggers for binge eating, which are usually feelings, thoughts, and excessive hunger due to starvation.
2. Review "Fat Facts" (Table 4.2) and demonstrate how much the women can eat and still maintain their weight. Encourage them to eat three meals daily and to make up their minds not to purge this week regardless of the size of their binge. Tell laxative users to throw their laxatives away.
3. Discuss alternative ways of coping other than binge eating. Review and demonstrate the "I COPE" concept (Table 4.4) and "Changing the Way You Think" (Table 4.5).
4. Help each woman identify her own alternate coping responses.
5. Collect the binge diaries and give the homework for the following week. Schedule an individual session with each woman if you are doing group treatment.

HOMEWORK

1. Review the materials, including "Fat Facts," "I COPE," and "Changing the Way You Think" (Tables 4.2, 4.4, and 4.5).
2. Develop your own list of alternative coping behaviors and write

them down.

3. Continue filling out the binge diary (see Appendix). This time fill out all three columns. If you do binge this week, write down what else you could have done so that you can use that the next time you are in a similar situation.

**Table 4.1. 1983 Metropolitan Height and Weight
Table***

HEIGHT		Small Frame	Medium Frame	Large Frame
Feet/Inches				
4	10	102-111	109-121	118-131
4	11	103-113	111-123	120-134
5	0	104-115	113-126	122-137
5	1	106-118	115-129	125-140
5	2	108-121	118-132	128-143
5	3	111-124	121-135	131-147
5	4	114-127	124-138	134-151
5	5	117-130	127-141	137-155
5	6	120-133	130-144	140-159
5	7	123-136	133-147	143-163
5	8	126-139	136-150	146-167
5	9	129-142	139-153	149-170
5	10	132-145	142-156	152-173
5	11	135-148	145-159	155-176
6	0	138-151	148-162	158-179

*Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, Health and Safety Education Division.

Table 4.2. Fat Facts

How many calories can I eat and still maintain my weight?

Multiply your current weight by 12—that's how many calories you can eat and not gain weight. For example: You weigh 110 lb: $110 \times 12 = 1,320$. So, you can eat 1,320 calories a day and still maintain your weight. About how much food is that? 1,320 Calories = 1 egg, 1 english muffin with jam, orange juice, turkey sandwich with cheese and mayonnaise, potato chips, 4 oz chicken, baked potato, salad, vegetable, apple. 1,320 Calories = 2 bags of M & M's, 5 chocolate chip cookies, dish of ice cream, 1 piece of pie. You can eat all of this and still maintain your weight!

What is a healthy weight for a person of my height and frame?

Use Table 4.1 to find the range of weight that has been shown to be associated with lowest mortality for women of your height and frame. The weights include indoor clothing weighing about 3 lb. The heights include 1 inch for heels.

How many calories can I eat and still lose 1 lb a week? Two pounds?

One pound of fat is equal to 3,200 calories. Reduce your intake by 3,200 and you lose a pound. Reduce intake by 450 calories a day and lose 1 lb a week. Reduce intake by 900 calories a day and lose 2 lb a week. So, if you want to weigh 110 lb, you can eat 870 calories a day and still lose 1 lb a week as you head toward your goal.

What if I want to lose weight faster?

Increasing your activity level means that your body needs more calories to maintain your weight. Increasing activity without increasing eating means you will lose weight faster. Regular exercise helps you reduce and stay slim.

How do I know if I'm looking slimmer?

Getting on the scale daily is not helpful. What you weigh on a particular day is not necessarily an indicator of weight gain or weight loss. At times, especially before your period and midway through your cycle, water retention may be the cause for your weight to go up. Also, inches lost through exercise may not be reflected on the scale. Remember, muscle weighs more than fat.

Table 4.3. Typical Menus for 1,488 Calories*

BREAKFAST	LUNCH	DINNER	
Fried Egg 2 Strips Bacon 1 Slice Toast	Tuna Sandwich 10 French Fries Apple	Fried Pork Chop ½ C Applesauce Salad with Dressing ½ C Rice	1,470
Bagel Cream Cheese	B.L.T. 10 Potato Chips Tangerine	Chicken Breast— Broiled ½ C Noodles with Butter Broccoli with Butter Apple	1,430
English Muffin Jelly Orange Juice	Roast Beef Sandwich Salad with Dressing Orange	Sirloin Steak— Broiled Baked Potato Green Beans with Butter ½ Cantaloupe	1,480
Fried Egg English Muffin Jelly Orange Juice	Fruit-Flavored Yogurt Apple	Fried Scallops Rice with Butter Salad with Dressing	1,450
Apple Pie 2 Doughnuts Chocolate Ice Cream Sundae Cheesecake			1,450
Candy Bar Chocolate Cake Éclair 3 Chocolate Chip Cookies			1,440
2 Jelly Doughnuts 2 Scoops Ice Cream 4 Fig Newtons 2 Brownies			1,400

*Height: 5'4"; Weight: 124 lb; Frame: Medium; Calories/day to maintain at 124

Table 4.4. "I COPE": Identifying stress,
Communication, Organization, Perception,
Enhancement.

IDENTIFYING STRESS

How do you know when you are experiencing stress?

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Becoming Assertive: Expressing your needs and saying "no."

Listening: Listening to the feelings of others.

Making Contact: Finding friends who listen to you and support you.

Which of these skills can you use the most?

ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS

Pacing: Choosing the rhythm that works for you.

Setting Priorities: Deciding how you spend your time.

Planning: Setting goals and working toward them.

Which of these skills can you use the most?

PERCEPTION SKILLS

Relabeling: Changing the way you think about some things.

Letting Go: Accepting what you cannot change.

Whispering: Giving yourself gentle, positive messages.

Which of these skills can you use the most?

ENHANCEMENT SKILLS

Taking Care of Your Body: Eating, sleeping, and exercising properly.

Gentleness: Treating yourself kindly and gently.

Relaxing: Taking time to relax through breathing, meditation, and other ways.

Which of these skills can you use the most?

Table 4.5. Changing the Way You Think

NEGATIVE MONOLOGUES

"I want to lose weight fast."

"If I gain 1 pound, I'll go on and gain 20 pounds."

"Gaining 10 lb would push me over the edge."

"I've discovered an easy way to diet. I can eat everything and not have to count calories."

"Eating sweets is the only way to give myself a real treat. It's the one way that I know to cheer myself up."

"The only way to relax while studying is to nibble."

"I had a ghastly day. I think I'll cheer myself up with a snack."

"I was good all day. I will just have a little pick now."

APPROPRIATE MONOLOGUES

"I'll gain the weight right back if I don't change my eating habits."

"This is crazy all-or-nothing thinking."

"There I go again with my crazy thinking."

"This is an easy way to die! My teeth will fall out, my stomach will rupture, and my esophagus will get inflamed."

"I can use the time I spend binge eating and throwing up to have fun in other ways."

"There are other ways to relax. Why not call a friend or take a walk?"

"Think how terrible I will feel afterwards."

"There's no such thing as a 'little pick' when my stomach is empty. Next time I won't starve myself—that's not being good!"

"I don't feel like doing anything at the moment. I'll make something to eat."	"I'm really not hungry. Binge eating will make me feel bad afterwards. Why don't I do something else instead?"
"I'm so tense. If I eat this bag of cookies and throw up, I'll feel better."	"Nonsense. Vomiting makes me feel gross. There are other ways to relax."
"I'm all alone now. It's my chance to eat."	"Nonsense. This is not the only time to eat. If I eat sensibly, I could enjoy my meals with others."
"It's there. It's free. Why let it go to waste?"	"I'm going to throw it up anyway. Why bother going through the trouble of eating and vomiting?"
"I blew it with that doughnut. There goes my diet."	"Why should one sweet blow it for me?"
"If I eat a candy it will instantly be converted into stomach fat."	"No one gets fat from one sweet."
"If I eat one cookie, I'll have to eat the whole box."	"I can enjoy one cookie, but eating the whole box won't make me feel any better."
"I just can't control myself."	"Of course I can control myself. I control myself too much."
"Eating is the only way I can feel in control."	"Nonsense! Look how many problems it has caused already. This is crazy thinking again."
"Eating is disgusting. Now I feel like a cow."	"Eating is natural. If I eat naturally, I don't have to feel like a cow."
"If I can't control my eating, I'm not worth anything."	"I am more than my eating habits."
"I have this gross bulge in my stomach. I better vomit it off."	"Vomit is more gross. Everyone's stomach extends after eating. Let the food digest and the bulge will disappear."
"I'm going to vomit until I'm thin and pretty."	"Continuous vomiting will make my teeth fall out—that's not very attractive."

"If I'm thin and beautiful then my boyfriend will want to be with me more."

"I'm always so worried that he'll discover 'my secret.' I don't even let myself enjoy the time with him. I should just be myself."

"I can't stop thinking about sweets."

"Whenever I find myself thinking about food, I can change the topic to some other pleasant experience."

"I just want to taste, no need to cut off a portion."

"When I eat standing in front of the refrigerator I can't tell how much I'm eating. I'll just cut myself a piece, sit down, and enjoy it."

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