

Week 3

Self-Esteem, Perfectionism, and Depression



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Week 3—Self-Esteem, Perfectionism, and Depression

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Week 3—Self-Esteem, Perfectionism, and Depression

In the first chapter, we reviewed literature that indicated that in comparison with both binge eaters and controls, bulimics were more depressed, had lower self-esteem, and had higher self-expectations (Katzman & Wolchik, 1984). We also reviewed some of the research findings supporting the relationship between bulimia and depression. Our clinical observations of bulimics were consistent with the empirical studies. Many of the women we saw were clinically depressed, and a few were suicidal. As we noted in the footnote in the second chapter, the mean score for our treatment subjects on the Beck Depression Inventory was 18.4, which is suggestive of marked depression.

In this session, we elicit a discussion on the relationship between depression, self-esteem, and perfectionism and how they apply to both personal and weight goals. Afterwards, women participate in three exercises. The first helps them become aware of the stringent demands they place on themselves. The second helps them to learn to nourish

themselves in ways that do not require food. The third exercise helps them to raise their self-esteem.

PERFECTIONISM AND BULIMIA

We use David Burns' article, "The Perfectionists Script for Self-Defeat," *Psychology Today* (1980, November) as a springboard for discussion. This article reviews the pitfalls of setting extremely high standards for oneself and describes some of the unpleasant consequences of perfectionist behavior. Contrary to popular thought, the setting of unrealistic goals leads to poorer performance. It also frequently results in depression, low self-esteem, and other negative psychological states. The thought and behavior patterns of perfectionists are described well in this article. We begin by asking group members what they think perfectionism is. After some talk among them, we define it as not so much as trying to do an excellent job but as setting impossible and unrealistic goals. When goals are set so high, nothing is ever good enough. Group members give examples of how they set unrealistic goals for themselves—both weight and personal goals. When we ask, "What is thin enough for you? At what point will you look at yourself and say this is the right weight for me?" most women reply "Never." Even when they do have a weight goal in mind,

usually 100 or 105 lb, it is usually unrealistic and based on an arbitrary number. When we ask them what they think will happen when they reach their desired weights, they typically respond that they would probably strive for an even lower weight. For many bulimics, one can never be thin enough. We integrate this with the previous week's discussion of how so many women set their goals way below the standards suggested by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company.

Many of our women had such high expectations in areas other than weight (e.g., getting straight A's, studying every spare minute, and so on) that many were defeated before they started. Group members gave examples of how they measured their worth by their success and productivity and felt depressed when they were unable to attain their goals. We review research findings that suggest perfectionists are more likely to be depressed (Burns, 1980) and ask group members why they think that perfectionism leads to depression. Many give examples of how they tend to perceive themselves as failures and as inadequate when they fail to reach their goals.

Anne is an example of many bulimic women in the goals she set for herself. "I feel that I should always be studying and making A's. No matter

how much I study, it is never enough," she said. "It seems I can never let myself relax. I should always be doing something," she added, "otherwise I feel guilty. If I am not studying and if I get a B once in awhile, I get very angry at myself." Anne continued, "At the same time, I want to do other things well. I work 20 hours a week. I also feel I should exercise daily, keep up with my housework, and always look nice." Other women cite similar self-expectations. As they talk, they begin to understand the relationship between setting unrealistic goals and the resulting depression and loss in self-esteem when these goals are not met.

We discuss the self-defeating nature of perfectionism in relation to the binge-purge cycle. Frequently, bulimics set impossible goals for themselves in what they "should" weigh (regardless of what is considered normal for their frames), in how much food they "should" eat, and in how fast they "should" lose weight. Anne again is a typical example. She set her weight goal as 105 lb (unrealistic for her height and bone structure) and fasted in order to reach this goal. This was clearly an impossible task because sooner or later her body needed to be fed, and this led to a binge. She then berated herself for not living up to her goal. In addition, Anne, like other bulimic women, typically set unrealistic goals for the rate at which she should lose weight. Even though she was aware that 1 to 2 lb a

week is an adequate weight loss when dieting, she tried to lose 10 lb in two days and became upset when this did not happen. Again, this led to her feeling depressed, guilty, and angry at herself—and eating a bag of cookies to punish herself! It is important to make bulimic women aware of the self-defeating nature of setting such high goals and to emphasize that setting lower and more realistic weight goals results in more weight loss. Again, we reinforce the notion that eating regular meals daily instead of starving leads to more successful weight control.

Although some women may become aware of the self-defeating nature of their thinking and behavior, they may still feel that there are advantages to their perfectionism. We ask them what are the advantages and disadvantages of perfectionism and cite from Burns' (1980) article some of the reported findings, which suggest that perfectionists do not display better performance because they set high goals. In addition to feeling depressed and performing poorly, perfectionists may also be prone to poor health, particularly coronary disease. They are lonely because they are afraid of criticism from others and fear that they will not be accepted if they are less than perfect.

When we talk about perfectionism, we reinforce the previous week's

discussion of how our thinking affects our behavior and describe how all-or-nothing thinking and overgeneralization, characteristic of perfectionists, lead to binge eating. Frequently, bulimics are either "on" or "off" a diet. When a bulimic woman is "on" a diet, she starves; when she's "off," she binges. When she eats a cookie after starving herself all day, she may say, "Well, I blew it. I'm off my diet now. I might as well eat the whole bag." Many bulimic women see eating in extremes—dieting or binge eating—with no happy medium. The all-or-nothing thinking is also illustrated in their labeling their day or themselves as "good" or "bad" in relation to their eating habits. A "good" day or "being good" usually means not eating anything all day. If she is "bad," meaning she started the day off with a doughnut, then she may as well continue to be "bad" and binge. This all-or-nothing thinking not only frequently leads to binges but also to feeling depressed and guilty afterwards.

Similar to all-or-nothing thinking is the overgeneralization from one situation to many. For example, Jackie told herself, "If I gain 1 lb, I will gain 5 or 10. I blew it today. I'll always blow it. I ate one piece of cake. I can never control myself." We caution women to become aware of words like "always" and "never" and "ever" in their thinking and to change what they are telling themselves. For example, Jackie could ask herself "Why should I

gain 10 lb if I gain 1?" or tell herself "Just because I binged this week doesn't mean I'll never control my binges."

Another type of statement that perfectionists make is the "should" statement. When perfectionists make mistakes, rather than trying to learn from them, many punish themselves by saying, "I shouldn't have done that. I should have known better." These "shoulds" are generally quite harsh and lead to guilt and feelings of inadequacy. We conduct a group exercise in which we ask women to list their "shoulds" and then we write them on the board (Figure 5.1). Women tend to place high demands on themselves (e.g. "I should be skinny, I should be able to do everything and do it well," and so on). We ask women to challenge their "shoulds." For example: What is studying more? How many hours of studying per week is enough? How can they do everything and do it well? We encourage them to lower their expectations so that they can meet their goals more readily and have a feeling of accomplishment. We tell them to make their "should" statements more realistic. For example, rather than saying, "I should be more organized," they can state "I would like to clean my desk within the next week." We may point out to them that by being more specific in stating a goal, it is easier to attain. "Cleaning a desk" is clearly definable and concrete, whereas "becoming more organized" is abstract and difficult to

identify.

Many women may resist lowering their expectations because they assume that only by setting the highest possible goals will they perform well. However, they need to realize that frequently the goals they are setting are impossible to attain and that this only leads to discouragement. If they aim for more modest achievements, the chances are that they will accomplish their goals and may even exceed them.

NOURISHING OURSELVES WITHOUT FOOD

We encourage women to replace their "should" statements by "wants" and discuss how they can "nourish" themselves in ways that do not require food. In another exercise, we ask them to write down which situations make them feel good, which relationships are nourishing, and what they can say and do to make themselves feel good (Figure 5.2). Many bulimics, as we noted before, are extremely harsh on themselves and do not treat themselves with the kindness that they would treat others. Connie, who was typical of many of our group members, was so busy "feeding" everyone else, she was not taking care of herself. Although some women may feel that taking care of their needs is "selfish," we point out

that being "selfish" means loving and taking care of yourself. If we are good to ourselves and nourish ourselves with rest and gentleness, then we have the energy and resources to give to others as well. We ask women to think of other ways they can "nourish" themselves or give themselves a "treat" besides food. Buying clothes or perfume for themselves, taking a bubble bath, listening to music, reading the entire newspaper, and taking a nap were some of the "treats" mentioned by women. Talking to themselves nicely, such as "you did a good job" and "you're doing the best you can," is another form of nourishment. We encourage women to "feed" themselves positive thoughts instead of critical ones. Friends also serve as "nourishers," and women are encouraged to cultivate those relationships that make them feel good about themselves.

RAISING SELF-ESTEEM

Another exercise is designed to raise self esteem and to counteract some of the harshness with which bulimics frequently judge themselves. This exercise is adapted from Morris and Shelton's (1974) "Ego Tripping." Each woman lists five qualities that she likes about herself (Figure 5.3).

After she lists her positive qualities, group members provide her with

further feedback about what they like about her. This helps raise self-esteem as well as encourages interaction among group members. In individual therapy, the therapist can provide the woman with some feedback and add to her list of positive qualities.

The homework for this session is basically a continuation of the work they have done in the session. We ask each woman to read the David Burns' article on perfectionism and to add to her "I Should," nourishing activities, and positive qualities lists. She is also to choose one nourishing activity from her list to do this week. To remind women to "nourish" themselves daily we ask each one to get an attractive box. We ask her to write down each nourishing activity on a small piece of paper, fold the paper, and put it in the box. She is to go to the box and take out a piece of paper each time she is tempted to nourish herself by binge eating. She is then to do that activity instead of binge eating. This is an effective exercise and has an element of fun and surprise in it. In addition, she is to ask three people (one who knows her at work or at school, one family member, and one friend) to tell her what they like about her and then she must record that.

This homework assignment has been successful in helping women

feel better about themselves. Although many women are reluctant at first to ask their family and friends what they like about them, most are glad they did. We recognize the fear and embarrassment at asking others for positive feedback and attempt to minimize those feelings by suggesting to the woman that she tell others she is doing this as part of a homework assignment.

Some women, like Donna, come back with tears in their eyes as they report the positive statements others have made about them. "I must be worth something, I never realized that I had so many good qualities," she said. "It really felt so good to hear the same thing from so many people," said many of the other women. We encourage them to look at this list over and over, especially when they are feeling bad about themselves. They may even wish to frame it! Some women will not do this assignment the first time. We ask them to do it for the next week. This has proven to be quite effective in boosting self-esteem, and we strongly encourage women to ask the people in their lives to tell them what they like about them.

SUMMARY

1. Go over homework for Week 2.

2. Discuss the relationship between depression, self-esteem, and perfectionism and how they apply to the binge-purge cycle.
3. Have women list their "shoulds" and discuss how these affect their behavior.
4. Help women find ways of "nourishing" themselves without food, through discussion of situations, people, and thoughts and actions that raise self-esteem.
5. Have each woman list at least five positive qualities about herself. In groups, she can receive feedback from others as to what they like about her.
6. Give the homework for Week 3.

HOMework

1. Read "The Perfectionist's Script for Self-Defeat" by David Burns, appearing in *Psychology Today*, November 1980.
2. Add to your lists of "I Shoulds," "How Can I Nourish Myself," and "My Positive Qualities," (Figures 5.1, 5.2, 5.3).
3. Choose one thing from your list of nourishing activities and do it. If you would like to be reminded of "nourishing" activities daily, here is an exercise you might like to try. Get an attractive box and write down each nourishing activity you can think of on a small piece of paper, fold the paper, and

put it in the box. Go to your box and take out a piece of paper each time you are tempted to binge. Do whatever is on that paper. Then fold it up again and put it in the box. Keep adding to your box of "treats."

4. Ask three people (one who knows you at work or at school, one family member, and one friend) to tell you what they like about you and record it. This maybe difficult to do but do it anyway. You may tell them that you are doing this for a class if it will make it easier for you.
5. Continue your binge diary (see Appendix).

Figure 5.1. "I Should"

1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
9.	
10.	

Figure 5.2. How Can I Nourish Myself?

1. What situations make me feel good? (Make sure you put "fun" things here, not goal directed activities such as "being prepared for class," etc.)
2. Which relationships are nourishing? Why?
3. What do I say and do to make myself feel good? Make a list and keep adding to it.

Figure 5.3. My Positive Qualities

- 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.
 - 5.
- What others like about me:
- Colleague
 - Family Member
 - Friend

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