

eating emotionally

what your cravings say about you

writer Catharine Nicol



Cheese, chocolate and chips; candy, cookies and crisps; even coffee, sodas and alcohol – our cravings aren't simply foods and drinks we're fond of or addicted to, apparently they tell us what's going on inside emotionally. I hadn't thought much about why I reach for chocolate or cheese, depending on whether I need a sweet or savoury pick-me-up, until I met Magdalena Fung, a nutritionist who regularly works at the Shakti Healing Circle in Hong Kong where she holds a two-day workshop called "Transforming Your Relationship With Food". I was about to find out some inner truths.

The modern world is a sybaritic smorgasbord of snacking. Everywhere you go billboards tempt you with 20 metre high hamburgers, logos representing fast food scream out from streets, cafes and restaurants line pavements and markets selling the raw materials for DIY dining.

From the moment we're born we are programmed to eat up, eat everything on our plate, eat as a treat, eat with our mouths closed, eat at social occasions, eat for health, eat for fun, eat to celebrate. Food is an omnipresent reward, or sometimes a chore, that must be faced at least three times a day.

So it's hardly surprising that many of us have complicated relationships with what's on our plate. Anorexia and bulimia aside, food throws up rules, regulations and

reactions, and one of the most pervasive, at least in the modern developed world of plenty, is overeating. This unbalanced relationship often starts early in life. "We associate food with nourishment, with love, because when we were babies, we were not just fed, we were held, stroked and softly spoken to," says Fung. "When adults use food as rewards, children associate sweets or chocolate with good feelings."

Of course at its most primitive, food is fuel, the fuel we need to give us the energy to live a full life, but perhaps our modern lives shouldn't be as full as they are. "We only overeat because some haunting feeling compels us to eat in the hope that the food will make us feel better, happier and more energetic," she says.

Overeating, and eating between meals is generally motivated by a particular craving, and Fung goes on to say that cravings often indicate an emotional issue. We're suppressing our emotions, while being unable to suppress the resulting reliance on food to bury these troubling emotions, and feeling more troubled as a result. "Probably men overeat more with boredom, frustration and anger, or just habitually overeat without thinking," offers Fung, "while women overeat more with depression (which is anger turned inward), guilt, or shame. And both sexes overeat with stress." It's a vicious cycle, but one that can be broken.

If you thought loving bread was simply an attraction of taste, think again. Bread may remind us of our childhood and indicate that we're looking for nurturing, according to Fung. Coffee for that extra energy? Or perhaps it's because we're not 100 percent happy with our jobs or lives, and therefore need that added oomph just to get through the day? Are you dying for a cookie? Or is that really affection? Spicy food, or adventure? Dysfunctional relationships, unpleasant jobs or colleagues, isolation and other serious issues can all translate into the foods you crave.

According to Fung, cravings tell a story, signaling unfulfilled needs, which involve fear, tension, anger and shame when those needs are not met. Understanding what the story is and doing something about it is a far more effective way to stop the cravings, and your dependence on food, than going on an umpteenth diet. And if you find a solution to the emotional problem, so much the better.

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"Our food craving is a source of emotional education," counsels Fung. "Instead of trying to kill our appetite, we can heal our appetite by listening to its wisdom."

A journal is a useful tool for highlighting your strongest cravings. Writing down, absolutely honestly, what you eat over a week or more reveals repetitious foods, which often come as a surprise. Then it's a matter of translating the emotion responsible, which of course may not be the same for everyone, and taking action.


Affirmations can be a relatively easy first step in the right direction. As many food cravings suggest that our lives are empty of love, nurturing, affection, adventure, reminding ourselves that we are special, lovable, and capable of adding a little fun into our own lives shows there is much we can do ourselves to solve the problem.

Fung takes her course students on a journey of rebirthing. Focusing on breath work, rebirthing can uncover any trauma at birth, which could be unknowingly affecting you in the present, and help you better understand any resulting issues, increasing mental clarity and overall potential. "We block emotions," she says, "because we need to be effective and they get in the way of producing results. Rebirthing lets them surface. It can be very powerful, and past students have cried, laughed, have even seen light or visions."

She also works with the brain by helping students understand how it works. The stem is reptilian and is driven by instinct and survival, she says. The limbic system deals with feelings, the neocortex frontal lobe with thinking and all the while the amygdale, which processes emotions, sends feelings to the limbic system by passing the neocortex. As a result many of the things we do and feel, we experience without thinking. She has students tap their foreheads to bring the neocortex into play, take ten deep breaths, wait 15 minutes and then review their decision to crack open another bag of crisps. It's surprisingly effective. How about a hot bath

or a yoga class instead?

And to really stop food cravings in their tracks, she suggests a detox to 'clean the slate'. A detox naturally takes the kinds of foods and drinks we crave out of the picture, and once we feel lighter and healthier, physically but also mentally and probably emotionally, it is easier not to fall back into our habitual ways.

But at the end of the day it's all about what's going on inside. Cheese and chocolate indicate some uncomfortably accurate inner truths I'm unwilling to face about myself. Do they tell the story about my traumatic birth, my childhood or my hectic Hong Kong present? And just what am I going to do about them? 

A few emotions cravings may trigger (although everyone is different) – and affirmations to help. There are many more.

- Alcohol** – you may be angry, lonely, and looking for some stress management
"I can ask and receive the help of others"
- Chocolate** – you're crying out for love, intimacy and romance
"I deserve love just for being who I am"
- Coffee** – you might be searching for energy you're not getting from your life or job
"I have enough energy to accomplish all my desires"
- Crisps** – you're feeling stress and anger inside
"I forgive myself and others"
- Dairy products** – you're looking for a soothing pick-me-up
"I give myself permission to relax"
- Spicy food** – you could be craving excitement and change
"I deserve to have the life I desire"

Magdalena Fung is a Canadian trained certified nutritionist. She gives health talks to corporates and teaches nutrition at the YWCA. She also provides nutritional consultation, rebirthing sessions and detoxing programs. Her website is www.NutritionIQ.ca