

Published in Chronogram 2006

Surviving the Guilt Season

Wise and Delicious Eating in Spite of the Holidays

By Ilyse Simon R.D.

Congratulations. You have survived. Not only have you survived deer-hunting season and shopping season, you have survived Eating Season. If you didn't already know, Eating Season began on October 31 and continued until December 31, when we moved into Guilt Season. Guilt Season starts at 12:01 a.m. on January first, and takes up most of the year, with a break for Valentine's and Independence Day, as well as sundry other lapses into indulgence. A great many people will be celebrating Guilt Season. They resolve to sprout healthy habits overnight, join a gym, and go on a diet or an all-out fast from 9 to 5. But when they come home, they succumb to the temptation of leftover Halloween candy, Holiday Cookies, cupcakes meant for the kids, and freezer-burned Pralines and Cream ice cream—all before going to bed.

As one may hang a star on a fir tree or spin a dreidle in celebration of a winter holiday, to honor and celebrate Guilt Season, we diet. The season-long holiday buffet has come and gone, leaving its mark. Monday morning, the diet begins. And yet, that moment of failure arrives and resolve is lost to an encounter with a candy bowl, a gnawing hunger after a skipped lunch, a deprivation of nutrients that shrieks "feed me!" All culminate in a binge. In go the cookieschipsotpies. Here comes Guilt, striding in, hip to conjoined hip with Diet. As they say at the National Coalition Building Institute: guilt is the glue that holds oppression together. Guilt is also the glue that holds the cycle of food restriction and overindulgence together.

But there are protestors to Guilt Season; I am one. Even though I am a nutritionist, I)"diet" is a four letter word. "Going on a diet" is the act of setting oneself up for failure through unsustainable deprivation and restriction. If you have dieted once, you likely have dieted many times, because going on a diet is not a sustainable lifestyle change. I believe in lifestyle changes to support good health. I believe in

chocolate fondue on New Year's Eve, and feeling great—not guilty—about every bite.

Diets fail partly because of the reduction in food consumption and bizarre eating habits many impose; partly they fail because of our feelings linked to the food, and to the imposed restrictions. Diets do not attend to the underlying problems.

Problem? Is there a Problem here? Holiday after holiday, and leftover after leftover, we feel guilty about all the food we have consumed in the last two months. We are bad. We are out of control. We have no willpower. We are getting fat. So we vow to exercise every day, eat tons of salad, and eliminate all sugar. No chocolate, no candy, no cookies, no soda. Hooray for salad, diet drinks, and grapefruits until summer. This resolution is not realistic. It only takes a hard day at work, a frustrating struggle with the children, an emotional quarrel with a loved one, and there will be something to upset the salad and grapefruit diet. Emotions like frustration, aggravation, boredom, and stress can have a strong connection to what we eat.

Feeling versus Feeding

Norma is in bed at 9 p.m. knitting a poncho for her granddaughter. Her husband, Arthur, is reading the paper in the other room, as always. Norma thinks about Arthur at the other end of the house, missing his company at night. He comes to bed so late. She would really like to unwind together, talk about her day and hear about his. She feels a bit lonely and sad and then...ICE CREAM! Oh! She can hear it calling loud and clear. "Maybe", she thinks, "it's time for a sweet treat. A little Chubby Hubby would be nice right about now." This is food distracting Norma from more upsetting thoughts.

Food has a covert way of upstaging emotional issues. It's easier to think about the ice cream—and succeed at meeting the desire for it—than it is to figure out where your relationship went wrong, or how to fix it. And ice cream is more satisfying than loneliness.

Eating is something we have to do to survive, yes, but it's easily entangled with emotional strings. And to get over the guilt and the dieting, one must get to the bottom of it. Let's say you are thinking, "I REALLY WANT THAT CHUBBY HUBBY ICE CREAM". And I want it with breakfast, lunch, and dinner!" So, first things first. Ask yourself, "Self, are you hungry? As in, has it been over five hours since my last snack?" If the answer is "No," there is something else at work. Begin a short dialogue. It could sound something like this: "Okay, Self. You are not hungry. What's going on? Are you mad about something? Are you stressed? You're standing with a spoon in front of the freezer door, not hungry, and you really think Jane's ice cream is calling *your* name." The purpose of this conversation is to be a detective, to discern whether the hunger is really about food. If you're like many people, it may really be emotional distress looking for a quick fix. Often, the circumstances prior to the craving hold valuable insights into what may be hidden beneath. Maybe your child just came home with a bad report card and you are at your wits' end. Maybe you're feeling lonely and forgot that you do have lots of friends who care about you and would want to meet for tea. Put on your Magnum P.I. thinking cap and figure what was going on moments before you heard the ice cream jingle.

Attending to Our Needs

What to do if the empty feeling in your gut really isn't about food? It takes practice to uncover any emotional needs that may be underneath the desire to eat. Sometimes professional support from a counselor or nutrition therapist is needed to separate the emotions from food, and then find ways to get the psychological needs met in more appropriate, direct ways.

My theory is that if we take our emotional desires out of the equation, we could hone in on what nutrients our bodies really wanted, and if we ate just those things, we would not overeat or undereat, and could nurture a positive self image. If we were tuned in to the physical impact foods have, that would help us decide what to eat. Which foods leave you energetic and which leave you sleepy? What portions satisfy

you and how much causes an overload? Asking these questions and being able to answer them may take a new kind of attentiveness, and patience with yourself. It will help bring eating into line with its primary task: nourishing your body for optimum health. It also allows for the fact that “optimum” is a different size and shape for each person.

We may have other very pragmatic needs, too. Perhaps that 4 p.m. slump, after seven hours at the computer, isn't your body's need for a mocha with whipped cream. Would some fresh air, sunlight, and a bit of motion in the outdoors perk you up just as well? Is the cheese biscuit on the drive to work filling your body's needs, or would a few more hours of restful sleep give you more sustaining energy? It can be difficult to distinguish between what we need and will make us feel better right away. Our bodies may be lacking in sleep, sunlight, fresh air, exercise, or entertainment—all of which are sometimes pacified for the moment with food, but not for long. Sometimes what our bodies really need is a small adjustment in our daily habits. Or perhaps it's a grander need, like a new job or a lifestyle change.

Normal Eating is a Lifestyle Change

Our bodies do need food. And it is difficult to balance healthy and tasty with pervasive and irresistible junk foods. How does one balance the task of eating to satisfy hunger with a demanding set of taste buds when the potluck on Friday offers nine different desserts?

I advocate “normal eating.” As Registered Dietitian Ellyn Satter writes, “Normal eating is being able to eat when you are hungry and continue eating until you are satisfied. It is being able to choose food you like and eat it, and truly get enough if it ... not just stop eating because you think you should. Normal eating is being able to use some moderate constraint in your food selection to get the right food, but not being so restrictive that you miss out on pleasurable foods.”

How does normal eating work? If you are at the open freezer door, have done your detective work to ascertain that the answer to “Am I really hungry for body-fueling

food” is “YES, YES, YES!” then you need Real Food. Make yourself a snack of something that doesn’t come in a package or tied up in a pastry box. Sit down to a combination of protein, carbohydrate, and fat. Some examples of real food include: organic turkey on whole wheat with mayo, lettuce, onions, and tomato; a bowl of black bean soup and a cheese and avocado quesadilla; leftover marinated tofu from Tuesday night with an orange. Possibly you just need something small like an apple with organic peanut butter, some organic yogurt with fruit and sunflower seeds, or some tamari roasted almonds.

Once you have attended to your real food hunger, you may no longer want something just to treat your taste buds. But what if you do? Fortunately, normal eating also includes satisfying your desires—within reason. If you have a craving for Green & Black Organic Caramel Chocolate, and you have asked yourself the introspective question regarding hunger, and even though you know you are not hungry and yet still really want that piece of chocolate...Breathe and have a piece of that wonderful dark chocolately confection. If you don’t, you may end up trying to substitute something like four low fat ginger snaps, two carrots, three pieces of carob, and six bites of cottage cheese with pineapple—only to find you still cannot stop thinking about Green & Black. Substituting other foods for what you really want may sometimes work, but for the other times let normal eating prevail.

Normal eating is varied. It is an abundance of colors and a variety of flavors. It is eating a balanced diet: lots of whole grains, plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables, organic protein and calcium rich foods, and quality fats and sugars. Chocolate cake and apple pie can have a spot in a varied and balanced diet.

Normal eating is also about moderation. Moderation is not black and white. It is the middle of the road, the gray area. A few squares of chocolate with your meal is reasonable. A 3.5-ounce bar as a snack might be a bit over the top. Moderation is to taste and savor every bite, and feel good about indulging once in a while. It is

realizing that every meal is not necessarily a celebration, that birthday cakes are for birthdays.

Problems arise when birthday cake takes center stage too often or are banned forever. It is not necessarily easy, learning to eat normally. It takes practice to live in the gray. It takes self-reflection to figure out what your body *needs*, and to realize that food cravings are sometimes expressions of nonfood needs. Grant yourself permission to enjoy life, to eat delicious foods, to trust yourself, and to screw up once in a while.

I advocate throwing your scale out the window this Guilt Season. Be a protester. Dieting marries us to guilt, and a long-term relationship with denial and struggle. It marries us to failure, and the inevitable self hate that follows. Instead of dieting, put your effort into creating a sustainable relationship to food. You might start by replacing those impossible New Year's Resolutions with the answers to some questions that may be hard, but not impossible. Do you feel good about what you eat? Can you be comfortable with your body size if you are happy with how you eat? Can you embrace Mother Nature's cadence as she keeps time on your changing body?

These are hard questions to ask, and answers often come very slowly. Be patient. Remember how what you ate made you feel. Listen to your body's needs and wants. Think about if food is distracting you from other issues. Eat sensibly, eat because you are hungry. Taste and allow yourself to enjoy what you eat.

By Ilyse Simon R.D.