

# Personal history

## Family Meal Patterns

Your history is as unique to you as your fingerprints. Even if you have an identical twin, your histories will not be precisely the same; experiences of the same event will be different, even if only slightly so. Understanding your history and how it relates to current patterns in your life can have a powerful impact on future behaviors and your ability to make desired changes.

One part of personal history that affects your weight as an adult is family meal patterns when you were a child. Think back to when you were growing up. What do you remember about family meal patterns? See how many of these descriptions fit your memories.

- Your parent(s) felt it was important for the family to sit down together for at least one meal of the day.
- Family members ate whenever and whatever they wanted; the family rarely ate together.
- The children ate meals different from those eaten by the adults.
- The kitchen was strictly off-limits outside of meal times.
- Children were forced to eat foods they didn't like.
- Someone in the family had special needs and ate separate meals that others weren't allowed.
- No candies, cookies, ice cream, or other sweets were normally kept in the house; they were only allowed on special occasions.

## tools for success

- Learn to recognize how your personal history repeats itself in current life patterns related to weight management.
- Identify family meal patterns from your childhood that are reflected in current eating patterns.
- Consider how parental attitudes toward appearance, size, and food can influence your feelings and behaviors.
- Understand how the influence of peers, attitudes, gender roles, and personal experiences affect your relationship with self, others, and food.
- Identify interpersonal skills that are needed to permanently change your relationship to food.

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- The children had no say in what they wanted for any of their meals but were expected to eat what was prepared.
- Children were allowed or encouraged to fix their own meals with someone to guide their early attempts at learning how to cook.
- The children had to fix their own meals because there was not an adult around to prepare them.
- There were times (frequently or infrequently) when there was not enough food in the house for meals and people were left hungry.
- The children were told to “clean their plates,” and reminded of the “starving children in the world.”
- The dinner table felt like a battleground, open season for criticism.
- There was fierce competition for favorite foods or portions among the siblings.
- The family ate out or ate fast foods much of the time.

Describe what you recall about your family meal patterns when you were growing up.

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Describe your current meal patterns.

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What aspects of your childhood meal patterns do you see carrying over into your adult patterns?

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If you tend to eat when you are feeling strong emotions such as sadness, depression, excitement, anger, what foods do you choose? Do they vary according to the different feelings?

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## Parental Attitudes Toward Appearance, Size and Food

How much importance do you think your parents assigned to your physical appearance and size? In some families, not only do the parents stress their own appearance, but it may seem that they judge others based on how they look. If this was the case in your family, you may have ended up feeling that how you looked was more important than almost anything else about you. The attitudes of parents can have a profound and lasting effect on their children.

Unfortunately, some parents feel their children's appearance directly reflects their worth as parents. As a result, great pressure may then be felt by the children that they must have a certain physical appearance to make their parents happy or proud of them.

Messages about one's appearance may take a number of forms. Children may hear parents'

comments about other people's appearances and apply those criticisms to themselves. After all, children want to please their parents, even if the messages about desirable behaviors are not directed specifically at them.

**Effects of Criticism**

Some parents are much more directly critical of their children. A child who had not been aware of any problems due to his/her size may find him/herself being cajoled or ordered to diet because of the parents' dissatisfaction with the child's size.

Suddenly something that was of little importance to the child is shown to be powerfully important to the parent. Parents may tease their child about appearance, using weight-related nicknames like "Miss Piggy," thinking that the teasing will motivate the child to want to lose weight. The more common effect is to create a feeling of shame in the child. Family members may be openly hostile and critical of the member who is overweight. Hostile criticism tends to leave the child feeling frightened or angry and rebellious.

Any of these kinds of interactions may leave children feeling that all of their self-worth is defined by how they look. Adults who have grown up in such an environment may continue to feel their worth is based primarily on appearance. When parents dictate how their children must look the children are unlikely to learn how to develop preferences or even an identity separate from what their parents have decided for them.

Write down what you remember were your parents attitudes about appearance and size when you were young.

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Describe the effect(s) of their attitudes on you then and now.

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Describe what you use as guidelines now to determine whether or not you feel good about your appearance and size.

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**Food Management and Weight Management**

**Control Over Food**

A parental wish to control a child's size or appearance can easily extend to absolute control over what foods are allowed into the house and at meals. This is not to say that parents should not have a reasonable degree of control over how things are managed in the home, since small children do not have the capacity to adequately decide on many things. However, one of the ways children learn to make productive decisions is through experimenting within reasonable guidelines provided by their parents.

Lou grew up in a house where sweets were not allowed except on a very few special occasions. She loved to go over to her friends' houses where they had all kinds of cookies and snack foods in the kitchen. The only way she could have sweets in her house was by sneaking them in and eating them in secret. Even now as an adult, she has difficulty not feeling guilty whenever she eats sweets and typically eats until she feels painfully full, telling herself "this is the last time."

## Early Nutritional Lessons

Try to recall what you learned about the basics of nutrition when you were growing up. You may have been taught basic nutrition in school. Your parents may or may not have understood nutrition principles well enough to use or apply them. Perhaps, your parents felt so overwhelmed with other responsibilities that teaching you about nutrition was a low priority.

Providing nutritious, balanced meals on a daily basis requires time and energy for meal planning, grocery shopping, and cooking. In families where both parents or the only parent work, time is often at a premium. Fast foods and pizza are a speedy solution to which busy parents turn. As the children in such a family grow up, they may continue to choose a short-term solution of speed over quality, whereas managing one's weight and nourishment requires a commitment of time and energy. Having a parent who spent an excessive amount of time planning and/or preparing meals may be just as damaging. Children exposed to extremes of food management may grow up to be adults who show extremes in managing their food.

### Parents with Eating Disorders

As eating disorders become a more frequently diagnosed problem, more children are known to be at risk of having a parent or primary caretaker who is struggling with disordered eating behaviors.

This is certainly unfortunate for the adult and the child. One of their early role models will be showing how to have an abnormal relationship with food. The child may learn to be anxious about eating certain foods or to be uncomfortable with their body as its size and proportions changes with normal development. Discomfort with body development seems to be particularly troublesome for young girls who are beginning to develop breasts and hips.

Having a parent with an eating disorder, the child learns that size and appearance is all-

powerful, all-meaningful. Food is given meaning other than of nourishment or pleasure—food becomes love, food becomes a reward or punishment, food becomes a close friend. A parent's lack of security with his/her own size or appearance may result in an inability to be supportive or reassuring of a child's appearance during normal developmental stages.

## Making Food Choices Outside of the Family Sphere

Children who have had the opportunity to practice making responsible food choices in a variety of circumstances are better equipped to select healthy diets during adolescence than are those from families who have either relied heavily on fast foods, or conversely denied access to them. Packed schedules, limited food choices, and peer pressure can make it hard even for teens with good eating habits to resist the lure of fast foods.

### Fast Foods are Faster

Fast foods are truly fast to obtain, as well as to eat. Speed of eating is a very appealing trait. Most adolescents have less than an hour to get to the cafeteria, wait in line for food, eat, and return to class. It's easy to see why students choose the fastest food option.

### Limited Choices

Complaining about the quality of cafeteria food is a universal student pass-time. Adults often contend students complain to build support for eating only the starch and dessert and throwing away the entree. This does occur. Truth be told, however, in order to make meals affordable, and comply with government guidelines for limiting salt, sugar, and fat content, the end result often has an unappetizing institutional quality to it. When cash strapped school cafeterias offer healthier but less palatable choices alongside familiar fast food options, it is easy to see why fast food wins out.

## Peer Pressure

During childhood parents, other family members, and adult caregivers have the greatest influence on children's eating habits and attitudes about body weight. As children enter adolescence however, peer pressure exerts a more powerful influence in these areas. Furthermore, during the teen years many young people eat more meals away from home than they do with their families.

**Adolescents with a good understanding of nutrition and experience in making responsible food choices tend to create healthy eating patterns.**

### Adolescent (and beyond) attitudes toward appearance, size, and food

With adolescence comes great insecurities and incredible desires to be accepted, to fit in. How or what a person does or doesn't eat is included in the process of fitting in. A television commercial that shows two new junior high students at lunch; one boy tells the other that it's not "cool" to bring his lunch to school anymore and that junior high guys drink orange juice instead of apple juice. While played for humor, the commercial addresses the reality of how the pressures to fit in manifest themselves.

With adolescent girls, skipping lunch entirely is very common; acceptable lunches may be extremely minimal (e.g., a dry salad, a piece of fruit, and only water). Recent studies have shown that girls as young as 9 or 10 years of age have started dieting or feel they should begin a diet—even if their weight is within acceptable norms. Any teasing about appearance can be distressing and the pressures increase as they enter junior high and high school. At such a vulnerable time in life, social pressures combined with possible parental insecurities about appearance place the adolescent at risk for serious problems with food.

## Involvement in Activities Having Weight/Size Criteria

Unfortunately peer pressures are increased when an adolescent becomes involved in certain school or extracurricular activities where there is even more pressure to be the "right" size. The process of being elected cheerleader or becoming chosen for membership of a drill team includes an emphasis on one's size and appearance. The girls' uniforms for either activity tend to be fairly form-revealing, adding even more pressure to be a certain size. The pressures to conform are high and the insecure adolescent may feel embarrassed and humiliated.

Gymnastics, dance (particularly ballet), figure skating and wrestling are examples of athletic endeavors that create additional pressures regarding body size. The aesthetic dimension of these activities fosters pressure from the coaches or teachers who are influencing their young students. Extremes of dieting and the onset of disordered eating behaviors are well documented within these disciplines. Discontinuing the physical activity does not end the adolescent's preoccupation with size and appearance. Based on the standards they learned as adolescent athletes and performers, adults may still feel that a relatively normal size is unacceptable. The need and wish for acceptance is a critical aspect of the adolescent experience. For the adolescents who desperately want to fit in, size and appearance may be one of the few things that feels under their control.

## Influence By The Larger Social Community

### Gender Role Models

The range of influence regarding one's appearance is of course not limited to one's family and peer group but expands to include the larger social community. This community consists of your extended family, family friends, teachers, neighbors—anyone else with whom you may have personal contact—as well as individuals known only through magazines, television, the internet and movies. With all these various

influences, how do you decide on what you will accept as an acceptable appearance? What comprises an attractive “feminine” or “masculine” appearance?

**Genetic Reality**

Society’s standards of beauty change over time, but are frequently at odds with most people’s genetic inheritance. Female models tend to be tall, slender, long-legged, relatively large breasted and exotic or dramatic in appearance. You may be short with a family tendency toward roundness, average-sized with small breasts and big feet, or tall and big-boned. Male standards of beauty which favor large shoulders, well defined muscles, a washboard abdomen, and chiseled facial features are equally difficult for most men to achieve.

As you continue to develop emotionally as well as physically, events in your history combine to shape you into who you are as a person. You have a choice in how you assimilate all these bits of experiences and how you use your understanding of the events to make further choices.

**Effects of Personally Traumatic Events**

Up to this point, the discussion has focused on relatively common dimensions of the process of growing up. For some individuals, however, their personal history includes the experience of traumatic events. While trauma may take many forms, for the purposes of this discussion it means someone has been physically, psychologically, or sexually abused. Any form of abuse has a powerful effect on the individual’s relationships with him/herself, with others, and, for some, with his/her relationship with food.

**Dealing with the Realities of Your Appearance**

While participating in the OPTIFAST program, your initial energies are focused on changing your appearance by losing weight. You know from personal experience that the process takes time. During this time of weight loss as well as during long term weight management, it

is important to notice and learn to appreciate other aspects of your appearance that have nothing to do with your weight.

Write down as many words and phrases that you can think of to describe your appearance, (e.g., tall, graceful movements, straight dark hair, clear complexion, etc). Do not use weight-related terms (e.g., fat, heavy, chunky, etc).

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What can you do during the time it will take for you to lose to your desired weight to increase the pleasure you experience from your nonweight attributes?

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Name the limits you recognize regarding your physical structure (e.g., will never be taller than 5’2”; will always have big feet) and describe what you have done or can do to accept those limitations.

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**The Relationships with Self, Others, Food**

**Survivors of Abuse**

Survivors of abuse frequently report a strong sense of worthlessness and a feeling that they were responsible that the abuse even occurred. Children are completely dependent on the adults in their life; feeling responsible for the abuse reflects this dependency. It would be too

overwhelming if they could not trust the person upon whom they must depend. Thus, it is easier to think it must be their fault these awful things are happening.

This feeling of responsibility, while functioning as a psychological protection, ultimately leaves the child with a great deal of shame and the sense that he/she is a "bad" person. They may feel strong anger directed toward themselves and their body; it would be easier to feel anger toward themselves than anger toward their abuser who might hurt them further. Survivors of abuse often report punishing themselves with self-criticism and other forms of self-abuse. One of those forms of self-abuse may be through misuse of food.

As adults, survivors of abuse are often extremely distrustful of the intentions of others. Weight may function as a way to keep others at a distance; both literally and figuratively. After all, although overweight people may be made the brunt of jokes in our culture, they also tend to be treated as though they are invisible to others. With invisibility may come a feeling of relief and safety as others leave them alone, mixed with anger at not being valued for what they can contribute, despite their weight.

Although survivors of abuse may feel relief in their distance from others, it does not mean that they never feel lonely or wishful of relationships with others. Until issues of abuse have been resolved, relationships with others typically remain conflicted and confusing. An abuse survivor may experience extremes of involvement ranging from distant and uninvolved to being too quickly over involved, perhaps with a replay of the original abusive relationship.

Survivors of abuse tend to have an extreme need for being in control of situations; with their history, this need reflects an urgency for warding off further harm.

In relationships with other people, absolute control is not possible. In a relationship with food, however, control can be almost absolute.

**Don't make the mistake of letting yesterday use up too much of today.**

## Food as Friend

When relationships with others leave a person feeling ineffective, angry, ashamed, frightened, or distrustful it is easy to see why a person would turn to a basic source of comfort such as food. Eating provides the natural physical effect of reducing anxiety or arousal. Unlike escaping unpleasant feelings through drugs or alcohol, overeating may not dramatically or destructively interfere with one's work, can be done just about anywhere, and doesn't break the law. Many people with eating problems describe food as being a friend; and for individuals who have been abused, food is indeed a better friend than were their abusers. Others describe food as a "legal" drug or addiction.

## Choosing To Change

People often repeat patterns developed during earlier times in their life. Understanding how their personal history repeats itself in their current life style can help individuals recognize the roots of self-destructive behaviors and make the choice to change. However, even when people understand the cause of their old damaging behaviors they may subconsciously cling to them because of the hidden benefit they provide. Some obese people may sincerely want to lose weight yet have trouble doing so because they believe their excess weight has provided them protection from unwanted sexual advances, or physical beatings. In their subconscious minds the idea of, losing weight equals becoming more attractive, or smaller which in turn makes them feel at risk of further harm. Others let weight become their excuse for any unmet goal. As long as they remain fat, they don't need to confront the risk of failure. Rather they can blame society's negative reaction to their weight for the reason they have not gotten a better job, more friends, a mate, etc. . .

Even without a history of abuse, some people have difficulty relating to – and forming relationships with – others. If these individuals

have typically used food to fill in the relationship gap, they may need to develop interpersonal skills before they can shift their focus from food to people. The shift from a safe reliable partner like food, to a person who has the capacity to reject them can be very difficult and frightening.

# Your Past Doesn't Excuse Your Future

## Life is not fair

Some people who experience significant abuse of one form or another during childhood or adolescence become hung up on the idea that it is unfair they were abused in the first place, and that they continue to suffer the effects of that abuse. Valid as these feelings may be, they are not productive and they stand in the way of people's ability to make any progress toward positive change.

## You can't change the past, only the future

People can have the notion that since they did not get the nurturing they wanted or needed during childhood they refuse to become emotional adults until their unmet needs are answered. This attitude can delay their ability to take responsibility for many aspects of their behavior including those related to their weight and eating habits. Until they acknowledge that they can't change the past, only the future they remain stuck.

## Don't go changing, trying to please them.

You can only please yourself. Some people periodically attempt to lose weight in order to please others. The need to please many help kick start a weight loss program, but it can't provide the motivation to sustain one. Furthermore, changing for others often causes people to feel resentful of not being accepted for themselves, thick or thin.

Without a better understanding of personal history, people may find themselves sabotaging the very changes they say are desired, repeatedly losing and then regaining the weight in a pattern of yo-yo dieting.

Your personal history includes the experiences you have had as well as the emotions that accompany the experiences. The emotions that linger after a painful experience occurred can greatly interfere with your efforts toward changing. Well-learned patterns, even if not particularly painful, can be difficult to alter. In addition to better understanding your history and the patterns you repeat, learning to take an experimental approach to making changes may be critical.

A history that leaves you feeling worthless may also incline you to be unduly critical of any efforts you make toward being different. Thinking of yourself as a scientist, with your behaviors as the focus of study, may help you move from a position of highly judgmental criticism to one of detached analysis—does this change help me meet my stated goals?—regardless of the emotions that may accompany the change. A difficult task, yes, but not an impossible one.

## key goals

Using the tips in this module, develop 2 – 3 goals to work towards.

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