

What Do We Do With Our Feelings When We Can't Give Them Food Anymore?

Nina Danielson, MSW

© 2008

Nina Danielson is the author of "What to do When Your Therapist Isn't There" (a 24/7 guide to coping with life on your own)

Note: This article first appeared online at WLS Lifestyles, a national publication and media outlet dedicated to providing inspiration, education and support for people struggling with obesity or maintaining a healthy weight. Find out more at <http://www.wslifestyles.com>.

When I first spoke with Dan Babbino, the president of WLS Lifestyles magazine, I felt an immediate and strong sense of connection to his warmth and enthusiasm and I had an almost elated feeling about writing this article. I felt so grateful to Dan for having given me this opportunity to write to this particular magazine's readers.. It has always been very important to me to reach out to others, not just as someone with professional expertise but as someone who cares deeply about other people. But this reading audience is especially important to me as I am a WLS survivor myself and I am so identified with all of you.

With these feelings in mind, I excitedly sat down at the computer to write. Just then, the phone rang. It was the veterinarian's office calling to tell me that my dog was dying of cancer. What a shock! And then, what overwhelming sadness I began to feel as the information started sinking in and the numbness of the shock started to fade. Oh my God! Oh my God! Odin is dying and it is REALLY happening. I wanted to give myself something. Food, a drink, a cigarette, ANYTHING! Just please, please make the numbness come back. This hurts too much!

I asked myself, "How can I write the article now? I'm too upset! I'm too overwhelmed! I am in too much pain! I'm crying, for God's sake!" I sat dazed, took a deep breath, and then I began to think again. I realize that what I am experiencing right now, at this very minute, is exactly what this article is supposed to be about! Moments like these. Those moments when life presents us with certain realities and feelings that we simply don't want to face and yet we cannot or should not anaesthetize with food any longer. Right?

I know that we often refer to certain foods as "comfort foods" and that we often use food because we think it gives us comfort. But, in the past at times like these, we didn't simply use food to comfort ourselves. Not really. Food primarily helped to numb the pain. It helped us to DEFEND against the feelings. Food wasn't just our friend. It was our friendly anesthetist. And, truth be told, it wasn't really that effective, either! We still

felt much of the pain that we were attempting to avoid and we gained more weight and more self loathing in the process!

And in actuality, as we well know, despite WLS we can still choose to eat to escape! One can put quite a few candy bars in that little pouch if one chooses to. We all know people, perhaps including ourselves, who have regained weight! And, as we are beginning to realize more and more, there are many of us WLS survivors who simply transfer addictions after the surgery to alcohol or gambling or shopping, etc

What does this mean? It means that after WLS we are left in a position of having had little to no experience with the handling of our feelings in healthy, non self-destructive ways. Our first response has always been to escape from them in one way or another. Learning how to accommodate and modulate our feelings is one of the most important requirements of WLS success. I remember when I quit smoking many years ago. For a very long time I simply did not know “what to do” when I got angry. What does one do when they are angry and they can’t light up a cigarette? The feelings were so intense and I had no tools to deal with them.

I hadn’t realized yet that all I had TO DO was TO HAVE the feelings. I didn’t need to take any action at all. I simply had to let myself experience the raw feelings. Easier said than done- that’s for sure! But, by allowing ourselves to have our feelings, we grow stronger. It is just like lifting weights. At first, the feelings (fear, anger, pain, love, shame) are very, very overwhelming. We can barely manage to accommodate them. They feel much too heavy- too intense. But, after a while our egos start to build muscles! We begin to be able to handle feelings with much less effort. We learn that we can carry them without assistance and no longer need to run away. The more we are able to bear our feelings, the less overwhelming they become. It’s as if we are children who are learning how to swim without using floating devices any longer. It’s really hard work at first and very scary. But, slowly but surely, we are able to swim with much less effort and far more ease.

Gradually, we get used to a new way of dealing. We turn and face the dragons, without allowing ourselves the option of running or hiding. In turn, this mastery of our feelings will inevitably add to our sense of self-esteem. As adults, running or hiding from feelings always diminishes the self. We grow weaker, not stronger. Historically, we learned how to manage our feelings with food because we knew no other way. As children, often our situations and subsequent feelings were so unbearably heavy, perhaps with some form of abuse or neglect, that we could not possibly have borne to carry their immensity all by ourselves. We learned how to use food to numb our feelings in order to emotionally survive. Sometimes, unconsciously, our parents may even have taught us how to numb our feelings. They may have been addicted in one way or another themselves or given us food when we were upset.

But now our task is quite the opposite. We need to learn how to avoid the food and to face the feelings in order to survive! We must continually remind ourselves that we are adults now. Whether or not we want to, we are now very capable of handling the most

painful of feelings. We just don't know it yet. We need more and more experience in learning how to face our feelings. This is what helps us to know deep within us that we are strong, substantial and that we can survive. I truly believe that being a successful WLS survivor is more about surviving the process of learning how to handle our feelings in new and healthy ways than it is about surviving the surgery itself.

What happens now? How will I deal with the death of my beloved pet? I will just have to handle it without food or some new addiction. Even ten years after having successfully quit smoking, when my father had a stroke, the cigarettes outside of the hospital suddenly started calling to me.,” Lover, come back! I will help you!” Ten years later! I didn't smoke then and I am not going to eat or smoke now! I will handle this difficult time by reaching out for the support of loved ones and by being “right out there” with my feelings as I am now being with you, my fellow WLS survivors..

I will have to deal with the profound grief that accompanies loss and I will have to do this without letting myself run away. I probably will allow myself to indulge in a little self-pity, but I will not allow myself to use self-pity as an excuse to escape! I will remind myself that, as Hemmingway said, ”Life breaks us all and some grow stronger in the broken places” and I will hopefully grow stronger and deeper because of my feelings and not despite them.

So, what is my answer to the question of “What do we do with our feelings when we can't give them food anymore?” My answer is simply that we don't DO anything. We just HAVE the feelings and we learn to get better and better at doing so the more we practice. Good luck!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Nina Danielson, M.S.W., a seasoned therapist and lecturer with 40 years of experience in the mental health field and author of **WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR THERAPIST ISN'T THERE**. She earned her master's degree in Social Work from Columbia University and is an advisor for The Compassionate Friends, a support network for bereaved parents and siblings. She maintains a private practice on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, where she lives with her husband and three-and-a-half dogs (they share custody of a granddog with one of their sons).