

How to Break Your Sugar Addiction Once and for All

***Editor's Note:** When a recent **study** revealed Oreo cookies were found to be as addictive as cocaine, many Americans were shocked. Dr. Rhona Epstein was not. She had not only experienced sugar addiction personally, but she has spent three decades as a psychologist and certified **addictions** counselor, helping others recognize and overcome their food triggers and addictions. In an excerpt from her new book, *Food Triggers: End Your Cravings, Eat Well and Live Better*, Epstein shares her personal story—and hope for true recovery.*

Growing up, **sugar** was my drug of choice. It was like heroin for me. Like most children my age, I enjoyed candy and cookies for dessert, but my seemingly normal affection for sugary treats led to an intense and raging battle that eventually brought me to a very bad place. I was only a teenager, but I wanted to die.

When I ate sweets, I couldn't stop. I routinely ate until I became ill. Like a junkie, I craved sugar, and I was willing to do about anything to get it: lie to my family and friends, avoid social situations, hide food wrappers—whatever it took to binge in secret. It wasn't unusual to eat a half-gallon of ice cream, a box of cookies, a jar of peanut butter and a bag of chips all in one sitting.

This was all done in isolation, of course. No one could ever know, so I had to become a master at hiding the evidence. I remember taking frozen bagels from the freezer and trying desperately to defrost them without using a microwave or oven to avoid making noise in the kitchen. I used to attempt to hide my ice cream binges by trying to make the top of the ice cream container look exactly like it did before I dug into it.

Over and over, I would fix the top until the whole container was empty. Then I'd rush to the store to buy a new container of ice cream and make it look like the one before. I had special hiding places for my candy wrappers, places I kept them until just the right time to discard them without anyone knowing.

I threw away food and swore I was done with it, only to go back later, pull it out of the trash, and eat what remained. Swearing I'd never binge again became my daily mantra. Promises to quit were quickly broken by failures to follow through. A moment of weakness would cripple me, and I'd find myself eating an entire dozen donuts on my 30-minute ride home.

I lived in fear of being caught. The pain was intense. I was completely out of control and hopeless.

Exercise was another part of the insanity. I spent hours every day running, swimming or doing sit-ups, attempting to repair the damage done by my extensive **overeating**. Of course, it was impossible to rid myself of all of the calories I was consuming during my **binges**. When exercise didn't seem like enough, I wore a sweat suit and sat in a sauna, hoping to sweat off the fat. I figured losing water weight was better than losing no weight at all.

Every attempt at change failed. Diets were short-lived. I tried WeightWatchers, the Scarsdale diet, the Pritikin diet, diet pills, appetite suppressants, fasting, purging, Fit for Life, overnight camp for overweight teens and Slender bars. Each new plan brought new hope, but that hope was short-lived. My **self-esteem** was destroyed from constantly failing to change, and after years of binges I had an overweight body that just added to my desperation.

Every area of my life was impacted. I couldn't concentrate in school because I was constantly thinking about food, dieting

or concealing the fat rolls under my baggy clothes. Ashamed and embarrassed by my weight, I avoided social situations and opted for isolation so that I could better keep my secret. I lost friends, and my family relationships became strained. I was angry that nobody understood me, and I was angry when anyone interfered or commented on anything relating to **food** or my body size.

I was trapped in a world where sugar controlled me, and I was losing everything in my life except weight.

Part of the trap was the silence. Back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, **eating disorders** were a mystery. They were rarely talked about in the media, and most people didn't know anything about binge-eating disorder, bulimia or anorexia. No one knew how much pain I was in because I worked hard to keep a happy exterior. Happy on the outside, dying on the inside. To most people, I looked like a normal teen having a good time. In reality, I was trapped inside a living hell. Every day, I wished I were dead.

I saw a counselor a few times. As I poured out my heart to her, telling her about the battle I'd been hiding from the world, she looked puzzled. She diagnosed me as depressed and sent me on my way.

She was right. I was **depressed**, but that was just a symptom of a much deeper problem. I was a 17-year-old mess who needed a miracle.

That's exactly what I found when I least expected it.

I was visiting another diet organization to try yet another diet plan in hopes of resolving my weight problem. I wanted to ask my parents for more money to pay for this new miracle cure, but a deep sense of guilt overwhelmed me. *Who was I kidding?* I thought. *I can spend my parents' money and bring home all of the prepackaged diet food, and there's still no chance I'll actually follow the plan.*

For the first time, I got real with myself. I'd spent much of my life acting like I was following a **diet** in front of everyone, while in secret I consumed enough food for 10 people. I just couldn't play that game anymore.

I walked away from that diet center and into a support group for overeaters. I didn't know it then, but this was my first step toward recovery. I found out I wasn't alone. A lot of others had done the same insane things with food that I had. A lot of others had learned how to stop.

This was a revelation and the glimmer of possibility that I needed.

There was hope for someone like me.

But the road from hope to recovery was just beginning.

The early days of recovery were all about opening up and receiving help. I was so used to keeping things secret that being transparent and honest was a new concept. Over time, I felt less **ashamed** talking about my out-of-control binges and secret eating because the people in the group had all done the same thing. They truly understood. I also learned that recovery was more than simply dropping the unwanted pounds that had resulted from my binge eating. To experience true freedom, I'd have to make physical, emotional and spiritual changes.

Rhona Epstein, Psy.D., ., is a licensed psychologist, certified addictions counselor and marriage and family therapist who has personally experienced recovery from food addiction. This article is reprinted with permission from her new book, *Food Triggers: End Your Cravings, Eat Well and Live Better* (December 2013), published by Worthy Publishing. Visit Epstein's website at .