

I'm addicted to sugar

The word addicted gets thrown around a lot. "I'm addicted to House of Cards or Dancing with the Stars. I'm addicted to the Harry Potter books. I'm addicted to the French fries at Big Al's Burgers." This is meant to be cute.

But my sugar addiction isn't cute and its impact isn't benign. It's done a very negative number on my blood pressure and my cholesterol levels. It has put hundreds of pounds on my body. It has mired me in guilt, shame, self-loathing, and a myriad of other emotional miseries.

So why don't I leave it alone? Because I can't. I can't take it or leave it. If I take it, I can't leave it. It's a simple truth but a very hard one to live with.

Addiction is often characterized as an allergy in the body (an unhealthy response) and an obsession in the mind. Neither of these is cute.

I am also an alcoholic. In my case, this is not a coincidence, for alcohol in its many forms is just fermented sugars. Same allergy, same kind of obsession. Same misery. Not every sugar addict is an alcoholic and not every alcoholic is a sugar addict, but many of us are even if we don't know it or want to know it.

It isn't cute to be a food addict. It isn't romantic or dramatic either. There are some great movies about alcoholics and drug addicts, from *The Lost Weekend* to *Leaving Las Vegas*, from *I'm Dancing as Fast as I Can* to *Clean and Sober* to *When a Man Loves a Woman*. But nobody makes movies about food addicts, too much misery, too little sensationalism.

Food addiction is a crippling drudgery. If you have it, you know what I'm talking about. I didn't expect to have it. I fought the idea that I have it for decades. Now I accept that this is part of my journey. If it's part of yours, read on.

Three experiences that set me up for self-medicating with food

Before the age of 9, I have no memories that involve food. I have memories of school, of my parents, of my siblings, of moving from Portland to Denver, of rooms and yards and trips. But no memories of food.

Then when I was 9, three experiences changed me and I stepped into a world of hurt that needed soothing.

Experience #1

On a sunny afternoon in the fall of 1956, I was outside playing with my sisters, age 6 and 2. I had turned over my bike and was clipping playing cards onto the spokes so they would make that lovely clickety-clack when I ride. My youngest sister, Kerry, was turning the pedals and watching the gears go around. Somehow I stopped paying attention to her and moved away or turned away, and she stuck her fingers into the gears. There was blood and her howling face. Soon we were all screaming and my parents came running. They read me the riot act for being careless, snatched up Kerry, and went off to the hospital, leaving me awash in guilt and shame. If they spoke to me about it more reasonably when they returned, I don't remember. I know now they were terrified and that they thrust that fear onto me. That didn't help me at the time. At the time, I felt wrong, so wrong, useless, irresponsible, dangerous. At the time, I started turning to food to soothe my emotions.

Experience #2

When we'd lived only eight months in Colorado, my dad lost his new job and we moved back to the Pacific Northwest. While my folks waited for the Colorado house to sell, we stayed with my father's parents, who were caretakers on a big rambling summer estate along the Columbia River. Their home was a 3-room apartment above the garage with a bedroom for them and a couch for my mother and the baby. My brother and sister and I had to sleep across the road in what was called "the Big House," where the owners stayed when they came up each summer. Now it was shuttered for the winter. It had no electricity, no heat, no plumbing, just damp beds and a bucket in the corner if we needed to pee in the night. My mother would take us over each night and lock us in until morning.

I was terrified every night all night for the six weeks of this ordeal. My mother had little patience for my fears. She was not an unkind woman but she pushed away

whatever she couldn't fix as if it wasn't there. I had nightmares for years after we moved into a Portland suburb. I couldn't sleep if my parents weren't home. I couldn't sleep if the door to my room was closed and a light wasn't shining in from the hall. My mother had little patience for any of this either.

I know now that this was post-traumatic distress, but neither my mother nor I knew that then. The only remedy she knew was to tell me to "forget about it." I couldn't do that so I had to find another way to make myself feel better: food.

Experience #3

The new home near Portland meant a new school in the city. My early classroom experiences had been engaging and joyful. I had spent the first four years in a rural 3-room schoolhouse where classes were tiny (there were only five of us in my class: Mark, Linda, Buster, Kathy, and me). We got a lot of individual attention and we were free to wander around the room and find things to do when we had finished a particular lesson. Now I was in fifth grade in a regimented classroom in a city school. We were expected to sit still, be quiet, and fold our hands on top of the desk and wait while other children finished their work. We couldn't leave our desks without permission. We couldn't talk without permission. Already tortured at night, I was now tortured during the day.

Enter sugar, Enter addiction

After a few weeks at that school, I discovered the Little Store, a corner market two long blocks from our house and I began spending all my allowance, plus coins I stole from my father's dresser, on candy. I went there after school any day I had money and on Saturdays too. The freedom of childhood in the 1950s helped make this possible. I could always go for a ride on my bike. It isn't long before I was eating the candy in school, sneaking it all day from a small paper bag in my desk, one of the convenient kind that had a large wooden lid that opens up away from the teacher.

By junior high, we had moved across town but there was still a candy store on my way to school. My mother had first taken me there herself. On that trip, she had given me a dime and told me to choose something for myself. I bought 10¢ worth of chunk milk chocolate. One bite and I was hooked. After that, each morning I left the house in plenty of time. My mother thought I was eager to get to school, but in reality, I needed the time to stop at the Sweet Shoppe. I was almost always the only customer at 8 am. Mrs. Elliott, the owner, never remarked about what I bought or how often I was there. Maybe she was glad to have the business. Maybe she understood what I needed.

I didn't know, of course, that I was medicating myself. I didn't know that I was establishing habits and brain patterns that would cost me dearly later on. I did know that I was doing something bad. I told no one about this. I hid the candy. It was not that I didn't want to share it, but I had to be sure I had enough. And I didn't want it taken away from me. I didn't want my behavior monitored. More habits and patterns got ingrained.

And I knew for sure that I felt better when I got as much candy as I wanted into my system. My fear, my restlessness, my boredom, all went away.

Addiction and anxiety

As a child, I didn't know of course that what was happening to me was anxiety. I had a hard time sitting still, and my body was jittery a lot of the time. I didn't know that I had become hyper-vigilant. After the weeks of sleeping across the road in the Big House, I no longer trusted that my parents would be there for me and I didn't know how to talk to them about this. I was afraid of everything that I couldn't control so I tried to control everything. I went to bed at precise times. I checked the locks on the doors each night. I insisted that we have a fire escape plan. I learned the seven warning signs of cancer and continually checked myself for any sign.

My mother called my obsessive and compulsive behaviors "silly." In her mind, I should just get over it. I know she didn't want me to suffer, but she didn't have any way to understand what had happened to me, and I couldn't discuss my worries and fears with her. She clung to her own childhood belief that negative emotions came from too little to do, and she could always find more chores to give me.

For nearly a decade, candy was my best friend. It saved me from the rigidity and boredom of the classroom. It saved me from the seeming indifference of my parents. It saved me from some of the angst and loneliness of adolescence. In fact, candy saved my sanity. If I ate enough of it, the fear went away. I could concentrate on the sweetness and then when it was all gone, I could relax into the delicious feeling of being sated, of having had enough of what I wanted.

I had formed a tight bond with the salvation of sweets and I had learned how to take care of myself. When I discovered alcohol, that worked even better. And when I had to give alcohol up because it was killing me, my old pal sugar stepped right back onto center stage of my life.

