

Julie's Trilogy

I. I Hate Myself Therefore I Eat

II. I Can Do This

III. New Friends That Have Hearts

I. I Hate Myself Therefore I Eat

“How is Suppers different from other groups and therapy?” This question was put to me, and I do have a lot to say on the subject. I hope my story will help others who struggle as I have struggled.

Diet programs did not honor my learning style. They forced me to operate from one narrow part of my brain, neglecting the other parts of me. First, I need to feel safe and bonded to the people I'm with. Next, I need to see and hear before I start doing. It is like a child learning a new language. When ready, I will start with the things that get my basic needs met and move at my own pace into phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, or in this case, chopping, preparing and eating in “complete sentences.”

I have tried to relearn eating all my life. Here is a familiar list:

- * Diet programs based on liquids = torture. The lectures were dopey and had nothing to do with me. They didn't teach me how to feed myself.
- * Weigh-in programs were too punitive. They felt nice the days I weighed less, silly and loathsome the days I weighed more. They didn't teach me how to feed myself.
- * 12 steps helped for a while, but I couldn't keep up with the restrictions forever. Life in a straight jacket isn't living. In 12 step programs, you're either on the bus or you're off. And they didn't teach me how to feed myself.

So here are some of the differences: Suppers is experiential. We cook and eat at a family table. The model of this behavior makes for a beautiful ritual. Eating is normalized. This is a huge step for people who have no idea what it is like to live in a body that has no normal self-regulating mechanisms. Suppers gives me healthy role models since my own internal signals are not my friends. I have always been battling my internal signals. I am so accustomed to restriction and self-loathing, I have to work with myself to permit healthy abundance. My gradual introduction to the possibility that vegetables could be luxurious opened the prospect of eating without the straps of restriction binding me. The opportunity to experiment, try new foods, feel my way at my own pace made it possible to form new tastes without caving in to the allure of my old companion: deprivation.

I found I could eat some fat and still lose weight as long as I eschewed the cheap carbs. Protein, it was revealed, is my friend. I was amazed at the results of the breakfast challenge. I am energized by a meal that looks more like dinner for breakfast. That sounds like a good thing, right? But I have to be cautious around positive feelings. I

miss the anesthetizing effects of sugar, the brief lift followed by the familiar lethargy. There is something about feeling unwell that draws me back into its snare. And even though my rational mind says, “choose life,” the forces that drive my automatic choices say, “You are not allowed to feel well.” I want to live. With every Suppers meeting, I cast a vote for life.

II. I Can Do This

It was a July lunch meeting at Suppers. I looked at the colors of summer on my plate, an emerald mound of just-picked greens, some yellow summer squash with fresh basil and garlic and eight pink shrimp cooked in a minute with some hot sauce from the Islands brought back in someone’s suitcase. Looking at the food is a meditation on all that has come before in my struggle with food and health.

I came to Suppers because I was desperate for change. My relationship with food had brought me to my knees, and I faced one of two possibilities: live or die. I suffer from a tyranny of labels: middle-aged, diabetic, obese. And there’s no place to run to, no magic bullet to cure my problems. There is only change. And I am the only one who can make it.

Needless to say, I don’t have the tools or I would have fixed this by now. As a psychotherapist, I’m intimately familiar with the cultural messages that contrived with my genetics to land me here. We are drowning in mind-screwing messages: “Be size 2. Pass the fries.” “Liberate women. Eat canned peas.” “You’re too fat to eat ice cream in public.”

It takes so long to build up good feelings, but it’s the work of a second for me to flood with the wretched memories of ways my body has betrayed me: craving the things that make me weak and feeling indifferent to those that make me strong. Without even recalling the details, it takes only a moment to buckle under the weight of emotional memories of failed diet programs and their whacky messages. In a flash I can destroy a happy moment, with shame washing over me for being so out of control.

But at the very moment I looked down on my plate of emerald green, yellow and pink, I said to myself, “I can do this.” I took a copy of the recipes and went straight to the grocery store to shop for the family dinner.

III. New Friends That Have Hearts

My old friends have wrappers. My new friends have hearts. One of the transitions I’m making in Suppers is eating as a public event, which means surrounding myself with people I trust. It takes a long time to peel away the layers of shame if you’re the poster child for a culture that offers an abundance of cheap addictive foods and skinny people advertizing it.

Straightjacket. Binge. Straightjacket. Binge. I literally didn't know that I could make choices some place in between living in a straightjacket and total loss of control. I carry my understanding of nutritional harm reduction like a friend in my pocket when I'm in uncomfortable social situations. I now have a little voice that points out the foods that are most toxic for me and asks, "If I can't get this perfect, what can I eat that's less bad?"

I definitely need structure, but food prison has never worked for me as a way of life. It's in the structure of Suppers to support people while they work at manifesting healthy change in their lives. And one of the things that makes change more possible is safety. Everyone at a Suppers meeting is there for pure reasons. Nobody is making any money or even selling their ideas; that's not tolerated. There is an assumption that friendship is therapeutic, that we can form healing relationships around the mutual desire to live better. At least some of the changes take place in the open, during meetings: learning to cook, eating at the table, acquiring a taste for vegetables and other healthy foods, listening and sharing. Other changes take place between meetings when I'm alone. That's when I get a chance to practice making right choices.

It all seems so elemental: talk, exchange recipes, give and get permission to eat. Leave the salad and vegetables on the table to eat at will, serve one portion of the other foods and don't go back for seconds. Observe how you feel. How much simpler could it be. When I eat processed foods, I feel sluggish, disappointed with myself and unattractive. When I eat real food, I feel energized, successful and self-loving. Even these good feelings are not enough reinforcement. I need to see the faces light up when I walk into the room. I need the witnesses to my process. When I go to Suppers, nobody asks if I lost a pound. They ask me how I feel. And it's a real question because how I feel is important data. I may not feel like getting myself to a meeting, but once I'm there I can at least feel proud of myself for challenging the entrenched isolation that pulls me back to friends that have wrappers. By going to Suppers, I choose friends that have hearts.