

Raquel's Story - The Angry Eater

My relationship with food has always been tightly coupled to anger. As a child, I lived in a turbulent household. The unpredictability of my father's alcohol induced rages turned me into a timid, fearful child. Since the angry tirades usually occurred late in the evening, I spent my youth feeling tired and nervous, ever vigilant for the possibility of a bad event, even when things were relatively calm. I ate candy for comfort and energy. My father was also a controlling, invasive parent and I came to think of myself as an individual who was incapable of an independent thought or action. As I grew older, my anger at my home situation grew as well and I used food as a weapon against myself. I ate less and less, hoping that if I were small, I would be less noticeable and less likely to become a victim to my father's angry, frightening behavior and be invisible to his constant need to control my actions and decisions. I also thought, at some level, that it would be preferable to disappear instead of feeling helpless to change or escape from my home situation.

As an adult, I continued to have problems managing my anger. I was afraid of the emotion. For me, anger was a dangerous beast that needed to be tamed, not an acceptable human emotion that, when expressed appropriately, was healthy and necessary to normal psychological functioning. As a result, I became an anger eater. As I swallowed my anger, it would build until it spilled out in inappropriate ways: snapping at my mother for not answering my invitation for Thanksgiving dinner within 24 hours, ranting wildly to a friend because someone had given me the finger at an intersection where I had the right of way. Since I had such low self esteem, I always picked someone "safe" to express the anger to; someone I knew would not retaliate or react in a way I would find threatening. In spite of my graduate education and a degree in counseling psychology, the theories I read about managing anger addicts and enabling adult children of alcoholics like myself simply did not register with me emotionally.

Meanwhile, I was alternating between eating huge amounts of food and eating almost nothing at all. When my anger was sharp and I was frustrated and fuming, I would eat nearly non stop during my waking hours (mostly carbohydrates, salt and sugar) to "soothe" myself. After I had pushed the anger deep inside myself, I would become depressed and turn the anger inward. I would punish myself for being such a loser by depriving myself of food, eating very little for weeks. This rollercoaster eating and nearly fasting took a toll on my health. I was always very thin and athletic. I would often run miles or swim miles to decrease the stress I felt. I felt stressed and threatened by the smallest criticism or failure. I was a cortisol producing factory. I felt exhausted and demoralized most of the time. I worked very hard and, unfortunately, was very successful at hiding and denying the storm that was raging in my head.

After I turned 50, I seemed to pass a developmental milestone. I cared much less about the opinion of others. I began to feel a shift in my thinking about the definitions of urgency and failure. The exception to this change involved the opinions of my husband and my children. Their criticisms and disappointment with my behavior, my cooking, and in particular, my husband's anger that I was an unemployed, stay-at-home mother not contributing to the family's bottom line, cut me to the quick. I was very angry about these negative opinions from my family and would often spend the day frowning and snapping at everyone or giving everyone the "silent treatment". I was eating lots of carbs to soothe myself. I gave up the food deprivation punishment but often had days when I felt constantly hungry. Despite a rigorous exercise schedule, I gained 10 pounds in a matter of months. I would then panic and start exercising and watching what I ate but one emotional upheaval sent me back to the fridge and the pounds came roaring back. I also tried a number of diets that left me thin but exhausted and prone to colds and flu.

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Since I have started a "suppers" program, I have noticed an evening out of my mood and fewer "all anger, all day" situations. I still have a way to go but I am able to take in the criticisms of my family and talk them out. I am still having anger spikes and I have my moments when I give in to some chocolate or over eat (although not carbs!!) to ease myself through the through the rough moments, but, overall, I see a marked improvement and my demeanor is more "calm than storm". My weight is slowly stabilizing. My greatest pleasure is my changed relationship with my 9 year old son. He has many of my psychological traits and tends to hold in his anger and then explode. Just a month ago, I was putting him in time out like a 2 year old while I shouted about his immaturity. I am now able to talk him through the episodes and finish the talk with a nice, long cuddle. It is one of the most joyous transformations of my life.