



WEIGHT LOSS FOR BUSY PHYSICIANS

— with Katrina Ubell, MD —

Katrina Ubell: Hey, everybody. How are you today? Welcome back to the podcast, so excited to talk to you guys today.

I am dealing with a little bit of a cold. I so infrequently get sick. I think when you work as a pediatrician for so many years, you've had all the exposures and you know also how to manage dealing with sick people, you know? I remember always people would ask me, "How do you not get sick?," and I would always say, "I never, ever put a thing in my mouth without washing my hands first." I don't think I've had a cold in years, actually, but somehow the kids must have brought home some sort of mutant virus, and so I'm dealing with that, which is fine. It's not too bad. It's not too big of a deal, but you might notice that my voice is a little hoarse. It's a little bit raspy today, and so I'm just kind of dealing with that, hoping that that goes away pretty quickly.

I'm just coming to you today from my "ploffice," I like to call it. Some people talk about their closet office, I have a playroom office. When we designed a big addition to our house a couple years ago, I didn't realize that I was going to leave my practice, and so we didn't think we had any reason to add an office into the addition. We had this small little room that we called the playroom, and thought, well, it can just become like a homework space as the kids get older. I even thought, "Oh, in 20 years, it's going to be so great. I'm going to have a really comfy chair in there. I can sit in there and drink tea and read a book, it'll be so great."

Well, so then when life changed and I decided to do this full-time, I needed a place to have my computer and a desk and everything, and so I kind of took over half of this little playroom. I've got all kinds of stuff around me. I try to keep it neat, but you know kids. It's not always easy. I call it my "ploffice," my tiny little ploffice that I'm in.

I just made myself some nice coffee, because I'm telling you, warm things when you're feeling sick, they just feel so good. You know, I've had people ask me about coffee. I'll just touch on that really quickly, about is coffee okay, is it okay to do coffee? You know, there are so many studies that show that coffee's great, and then there's studies that show that maybe caffeine isn't so great. I personally am almost off of caffeine. I mean, I've been on and off caffeine

many times over the years, because I really am a person who gets addicted to it quickly, and when I don't get it I feel terrible. That was more the issue of trying to make it so that I didn't feel bad if I wasn't able to consume a bunch of caffeine, but I actually decided to get off of it for different reasons. I've had acid reflux for a long time and my GI wanted me to get off of my proton pump inhibitor, and so I've been trying to make Zantac work. It hasn't been going that great, so I thought, well, you know what, let me try to get off the caffeine and see if that helps a little bit, because you know it's a possibility.

Then also this year ... I swear, you turn 40, everything starts to fall apart ... I was diagnosed not only with rosacea on my face, but I was diagnosed with rosacea in my eyes, so I have ocular rosacea, which I did not even know was a thing, but apparently it is. Apparently if you don't manage it well, it can really become a problem as you age. I was definitely having symptoms of that ocular rosacea, and again, warm drinks and caffeine can make it worse, so I thought, all right, well, I might as well get off of this. The only reason I'm still having a little bit of caffeine is because we still have a bag full of regular coffee beans, so what I've been doing is just mixing it into some of the decaf beans, and I think ... I mean, the fraction right now is like I'm at like a tenth or something like that, a ninth, so it's really a small amount. I could go off if I needed to.

Anyway, so it's something to kind of think about, if you've been thinking that your caffeine addiction is a little too much, or it's making you have a lot of thoughts about running through Starbucks all the time or your local coffee shop, thinking, "Oh, I need this, I need this pick-me-up." You know, I've read that when you're on caffeine regularly, then you don't get actually as good of a pick-me-up from coffee. It's more like you're just trying to maintain, and when you're off caffeine and then you need a pick-me-up, you use caffeine and it actually does give you that burst of energy that you're looking for. Something to think about, a little food for thought.

Today's topic. Today I want to talk to you guys about something that has a big correlation with eating and overeating and being overweight, but is not actually about that, and that is about owning too much stuff and how that contributes to our weight problems, how it's in line with our weight problems. I'm going to mostly be talking about clothing, and by clothes I mean actual clothing but also shoes, handbags, accessories, makeup, all of that. We'll touch on some other ways that we overspend as well.

There's really two elements to this problem. One, you currently own too much stuff, and/or two, you're buying more stuff than you need. You either have it already and then you're bringing in too much. It's probably a combination of both of them for most people. I would make that assumption. This is a really common habit for people who are overweight, because not only are you using food to buffer or neutralize your negative emotions, you're using spending in the same way, to help you avoid those negative emotions and to create pleasure in your life. Ultimately, our primitive brains just want us to seek pleasure, avoid pain, and expend the least amount of effort possible, so that we can survive as a human species.

We can carry on the human species, nothing bad will happen, you're not going to die, so that primitive brain is just trying to protect us.

Now, I want to be clear that creating pleasure in your life is not a bad thing. Our brains are uniquely set up so that we pay attention when something creates pleasure for us, and then we are driven to repeat that over and over again, but some forms of pleasure are really more natural. They give us pleasure that has no down side, so here's an example.

Think about the pleasure you got from the sense of accomplishment that you had when you graduated from med school, right? There's no down side to that. Nobody could take that pleasure and that sense of accomplishment away from you. Days, weeks, months, years later, you still felt that pleasure, and you probably still feel it now, so the net pleasure there is positive. Now think about entertaining yourself by spending \$1,000 on clothes and shoes. You get pleasure for a few hours while you're selecting things, purchasing everything, and then probably some more pleasure when you wear everything for the first couple times, but then the credit card bill arrives and you have to pay it.

Maybe your spouse gives you a hard time for spending so much again, and maybe once again you aren't saving for retirement the way you should because after paying all the bills, there's not that much left. Then you realize that those boots you bought are actually pretty uncomfortable, but now you can't return them because you've worn them, and then your closet is bursting at the seams and you can't even see what you own anymore. All of that takes away from that original pleasure, so it's like a pleasure equation, is the way I think about it. You have the positive pleasure on the front end, but then the negative emotion that negates the pleasure on the back end.

In that equation, the net pleasure is zero, or maybe it's even negative. You went out in search of pleasure, only to have it taken away in the end and for it to create suffering for you in the end. It's the same with food. You get pleasure from eating the warm brownies for about 10 to 15 minutes, but then you feel bad about how much you ate. Maybe you feel a little bit sick because you ate too much, and then your clothes don't fit and the scale goes up, and then you beat yourself up for not having any self-control yet again, so that net pleasure is for sure zero at best and negative at worst. We think we're doing ourselves a favor, but we're actually making life more uncomfortable for ourselves.

You know, we all have beliefs around shopping and clothes that may or may not serve us. Some conditioned beliefs that many of us have come from just living in a first-world country where there's always plenty to buy, generally at a good price, so think of the term "retail therapy," right? Many of us have a belief that shopping makes us feel better, and it might actually make you feel better, based on what your thoughts are about it and also the level of dopamine that you get when you spend.

For some people it's like a huge dopamine hit. It's a really, really big deal for them. For others, it's not. Think about people who smoke. For some people it is a huge dopamine hit. It's one of the best things in the world. For those of us who don't smoke, I could have cigarettes laying all around me all the time and have no interest in them at all. It's just not a draw for me.

I know for me, before I lost the weight for good, I would get a lot of pleasure out of shopping for shoes, handbags and makeup, because I had no shame about the sizes I was buying. It was a very safe place. If I were to go out shopping for jeans, usually all I had were negative thoughts about my body, how the jeans fit or don't fit, how miserable jean shopping is, and I wouldn't get much pleasure out of that shopping trip at all really, unless I happened to find those unicorn jeans that fit just right. You know, like the needle in the haystack jeans.

Other beliefs about shopping that we have might have been handed down to us by our family members. We might view shopping the way our mothers did or do, or our aunts or our sisters, our cousins, our close friends. We grow up in a certain culture in our families and our friend groups, and then we don't usually take the opportunity to actually identify what our beliefs are and whether they serve us or not. We just take it at face value, this is just how I think about shopping. Like I believe I need these foods to feel better, I believe I need shopping to feel better. This is what I do.

Now I want to point out that sometimes we don't even shop a lot for ourselves, because of the sizing or how the clothes are feeling or fitting us at the moment, but then we totally overshop for our kids. How many of us buy tons of adorable outfits for them, which usually fit them so it's still easy to choose, and then we get pleasure from anticipating how cute they're going to look when they wear the clothes, and then also pleasure when we enjoy how cute they look when they actually wear the clothes.

The down side, there are down sides there. The down side is that they have clothes coming out of their ears. Their rooms are a mess. When they grow and you have to go through everything to see what fits and what doesn't, it's a lot of work, so then you avoid it. Their drawers and their closets are jam-packed. You can barely find anything. They certainly aren't able to choose their clothes for themselves very well, right, because they have way too many choices.

You turn around and your daughter has dressed herself. She's wearing sparkly tights, her swimsuit, a feather boa and like rain boots, you know. Not that there's anything wrong with that, I love kids who have that eclectic taste, but if the clothes that are available to choose from are the clothes you want the kids to wear ... meaning season-appropriate ... they may not match, but at least they'll be warm enough or not too warm, and that happens when you don't have so much stuff in there.

Another way that we can overshop that feels very safe is by buying home decor. Again, you know, it always fits, right? You never have to worry about that. If we're shopping at discount stores like Target or HomeGoods or T.J. Maxx, we get the thrill of the bargain, which gives us pleasure, plus the thrill of buying something pretty that we get to enjoy looking at when we're home. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for creating a visually pleasing home environment, but think how often most of the decor that we own is packed away in bins in the attic or the basement, and we're bringing new things in, but we don't take the time to filter through and get rid of the things we don't really like anymore.

We don't take the time to rotate the decor out because we feel too busy, so we still have the snowflake decorations up in June. Or we really want to channel our inner Joanna Gaines from "Fixer Upper" and decorate like her, but then we feel like we can never really get the style right, not enough shiplap or something, right, so then we buy more things, and clutter up all the closets and all the flat surfaces and all the storage areas, and we just keep collecting, and we don't even like the majority of what we own.

I was thinking about this, and I think for a lot of us, this habit starts in our training. We have so little money, for most of us, and the quality of the stuff we have and can afford is poor. I always would kind of joke that we were like developmentally delayed or stunted in our 20s, because while our friends graduated college and got these great jobs, or maybe did a little ... like a master's degree or something, but then again right away got out and got a good job, we did ... you know, we spent another decade, basically, in school, and then doing our residencies.

By the time we got to the point where we were actually making a reasonable salary, we were like, "Oh, wait. Everyone's totally traveled and had all this fun, and really have experienced the world and maybe they've started their families, and we're just getting started." A lot of times there's this idea of we need to catch up. We are like, "Whoa, we need to start having kids, we need to start having "real life" happening for us.

I think that extends well into our lives as attendings. We start off being really frugal and careful with our spending, and then use bargain shopping often as a way of buffering or neutralizing in our training, because it gives us pleasure when so much in our daily lives doesn't give us pleasure, right? You know, because you're on call all the time, you're working like crazy, so you get that one Saturday off and you go, "You know what, just having this day off isn't enough. I need to make it even better by going and shopping."

Then we start out in practice with a bunch of clothes that are cheaply made and don't hold up well, and we start making some money. Because of the thoughts that we have that make us feel deprived of the nice things that other people we know have had ... you know, we've been deprived for so long ... we might indulge and spend money on nicer, better made designer clothes and shoes, or we might keep buying the discount clothes and shoes but just way more of them, because we can. You know, if some is good, then more is better.

Then we might gain or lose some weight, so then we keep the old clothes just in case, you know, we lose the weight, or what if I might gain again, I might need to keep those. Then if you throw a pregnancy in there, we buy a whole new maternity wardrobe, and then of course that needs to be updated with every subsequent pregnancy. For me, I kept full wardrobes of about three different sizes for many, many years, because I'd gain some weight and then I'd lose it again, and then I'd have a baby and wear the maternity clothes, and then after that when I'd go back, I didn't want to wear maternity clothes. I'd need the biggest clothes I had again when I went back to work, and then work through all the clothes again as I lost the baby weight.

Ultimately this served me, because I didn't overspend too much on new clothes during this time. It wasn't like every year I was buying all these new clothes, but I still did own way too many items. I could have definitely pared those down. I mean, so many that I'd lose them in my closet. When the closet was full, I would just pack some seasonal things away in those giant plastic tubs, just to be forgotten about, right? Every now and then I'd get this bug to go through the closet, and find all these things that I had replaced and bought again because I didn't remember I had them. I was just repeating this cycle of overconsuming and overbuying.

When we're shopping, especially like online, it's so easy to overspend too. When I was in practice and even still now, I do most of my personal shopping online and for my kids too, just for convenience purposes. Then, you know, your favorite store is offering a sale that you can't refuse, and you end up buying more than you expected. This makes you feel good for a short time. Again it's like when you eat flour or sugar. You get that dopamine hit. Maybe it's a little dopamine hit, maybe it's a big dopamine hit.

Then a few days later, you get the new items and you see that some don't really totally fit perfectly, or the color's a bit off on the scarf or the sweater is a lot itchier than you thought it would be, the shoes are kind of pinchy, but maybe they just need to stretch out a little bit. I would tell myself that, "Well, I probably don't need to walk in them very much, so it's not too big of a deal," but they rubbed kind of in all the wrong places.

When this happens, though, most of us don't send those items back, right? It's too much hassle. You have to package it back up. You've got to get a label for it or you've got to go to the post office and wait in line, then pay for shipping again possibly, to return it. If the item seems mostly wearable, we usually keep it, and then it fills up more space in our closets. It crowds out the clothes that we actually like and wear.

Sometimes something is a little too small, but we know that we're trying to lose a few pounds right now, so keeping the shirt makes sense, right? Like it's going to fit in a month or two. Then nine months later, twelve months later, we're donating that shirt unworn because it still doesn't fit, and I never even really liked it that much anyway.

As I'm doing that, I'm having underlying thoughts that create negative emotions for me, and those thoughts aren't necessarily on the surface, very obvious to me, but they're still there, so here's a couple of examples of some thoughts that I would experience when I was going through the clothes.

"You never do what you say you're going to do. You said you'd lose weight, but you didn't. What a waste of your money, to buy things that you never wear and end up just giving away." This, of course, creates negative emotions, because our thoughts create our emotions. Some negative emotions that I'd experience when I was having too many clothes in my closet were overwhelmed, irritated, frustrated, confused, indecisive, and then ultimately checked out, really just in an effort to not feel those negative emotions so intensely.

Then my actions ... because our emotions drive our actions ... my actions when I felt that way were to berate myself, probably declutter some of my clothes, but with an overriding feeling of being a glutton or not being able to control myself, not a feeling of generosity, being able to pass on what I don't need to someone who would get good use out of it. Or I would just check out, like I said, and just decide not to declutter at all because the emotions were too uncomfortable, so I'd just avoid it and go do something else.

The double whammy, though, for some of us, is that we still have considerable educational debt. I'd say the vast majority of physicians have to take loans of some sort to get through training, and some way more than others, but most of us, and those of us who have very large sums that we're working on paying off, we are maybe paying enough to have it paid off in 20 years or 30 years. Think about all that interest.

There are doctors who have paid off their sizable, sizable debt, like on the order of multiple six figures, within a couple of years of entering into practice, and what they do is they still live frugally, they don't overspend, they don't immediately go buy the ginormous McMansion and the luxury cars. They're basically not trying to compensate for the developmental delay that I talked about, and they take care of all that debt first.

We know that this is possible, and for them, think of the long-term net positive pleasure that comes from having freedom from that debt. I'm not necessarily saying that that's what you should do, but that it is a possibility, that you can get pleasure from taking care of the debt that you have, and then knowing when you are purchasing something, you can afford it, it's within the budget.

Today, I really want to encourage you to open your eyes to other areas in your life where you are buffering or neutralizing, where you're seeking pleasure that results in a down side for you. When you're very deliberate and intentional about what you buy for yourself, you're so much less likely to experience that zero net pleasure. You're buying what fits you well, what's comfortable and flattering, and most importantly what you need.

Ask yourself, what are your beliefs about shopping and consuming? Are you really needing more connection with friends instead of more things? Are you trying to sub one thing for the other? Are you shopping to distract yourself from the realization that your marriage needs work? Are you having a hard time dealing effectively with the stress of your job, so you spend to try to feel better? What is so intolerable in your life that you're avoiding by overspending? If we work through that intolerable situation so that it's not intolerable anymore, then you won't feel so driven to buffer and neutralize with food and shopping.

I just want to mention here really quick that in a situation like this, putting yourself on a budget is like buying a diet plan. It's an external limit that feels restrictive. It's a way of protecting you from yourself. You have to use willpower to keep within that budget, because the thoughts and feelings that were driving you to overspend in the first place are still there. It's just like with eating.

When we go back to that thought model, we know that when we change our thoughts and feelings ... not the circumstances in our lives, but we change our thoughts and feelings about the circumstances in our lives, so that we no longer feel driven to shop or overeat in order to deal ... it's not hard to keep within a certain financial framework, so that you reach the financial goals that you want, and your life goals. You know, you get some pleasure from what you own, but not with a down side.

As you lose weight, you are probably going to want to buy some new clothes. Even if you've saved some of your smaller sizes, you'll want to update to certain styles, but that doesn't mean that you have to overspend. When you hit that new size, you go through the clothes you already have, you try them on. You separate out what doesn't fit well, what's unflattering, what's that color that you never even really liked. You just know you're not going to wear it, no matter how much money you spent on it, and then donate or sell those clothes.

Think about what you really need and not just what you want, and know that there is so much more lasting pleasure to be gained when you have a closet that has fewer items in it, but they all fit well and they're all season-appropriate, and you'd be happy wearing any of them today.

I'd love to get a conversation going over on the show notes page for this episode. Share with me and all the other listeners what works for you. Have you had success with the KonMari decluttering method? Have you done Project 333? Are you a fan of the capsule wardrobe? Do you send your discard pile of clothes you're not going to wear to thredUP or Poshmark to sell? Let's get some great tips and tricks going in the comment section. You can find that page at KatrinaUbellMD.com/9.

I can't wait to hear from you guys. I can't wait to read all your great tips. Have an awesome week, and I'll talk to you guys soon. Take care. Bye-bye.