



WEIGHT LOSS FOR BUSY PHYSICIANS

— with Katrina Ubell, MD —

Katrina Ubell: Well, hello there my friends, my lady doctors, how are you? And everybody else, all my non-lady doctors, just my ladies or men. I have some men who love listening too and welcome to youtoo, men. I'm so happy you're here. You guys are my favorites. You guys, I want to start off this podcast today by mentioning and reassuring you about something that a client brought up to me just a couple of days ago. She said, "Katrina, it seems like you just totally have it together. Like you just never have any negative thoughts. You just totally know how to manage your mind. You're just rocking it on a daily basis," and that thought was actually making her feel bad that she wasn't changing her thinking more rapidly and feeling better more rapidly.

I just want to reassure you guys, that I don't have it all together. I'm a human being like anybody else. I work through this stuff every day. Now, is my life considerably better than it used to be? For sure. Oh my gosh, so much better. My thinking has improved so much and that by default has changed my experience of life for the better, so much. I mean, my relationship with everybody in my life is considerably better. Do I still have work to do in certain areas? For sure I do and I still am doing it on a daily basis. Sometimes we have these relationships that are really a struggle or we just really think we're right. I'm totally justified, I'm thinking the way I think and so we have to do a lot of work on it and we work on things. We change our thinking a little and then some other things come up, okay, I have more work to do and we continue working on all of that.

Even with food too. I'll be having some smooth sailing for a while. Things are going great. No issues and then I get a little blip too and something's kind of goofy and I have to relook at everything and kind of make some tweaks to my eating and my protocol. I want to just reassure you that number one, it's normal. I think the number of people who achieve enlightenment or whatever you want to call it, whatever that ends up even meaning is very, very few. Most of us, even people who are very skilled at this are every day working on managing their minds and paying attention to their food too. My mom and I do not share any physical body characteristics. I definitely just took after other people on our family, not her, and so she ... Her build is just much smaller than mine and she never had to even pay attention to one thing that she ate, I think she said till she was like 44 or something, maybe 42 but somewhere early 40's there, just never even had to think about it or exercising or any of that, just was never an issue.

Of course that has not been my experience as you guys know. But she didn't just decide like, "Oh, okay, now I'm just going to gain weight and this is how it goes as you get older." She was not willing to accept that as just a fact of life so she weighs herself. She's always watching what she's eating and not in a pathological way. I mean, she is just doing it to keep track so that it doesn't become a problem. She's in her mid-70's now and I just look at her. I mean, she's doing amazing. She still totally has her weight under control. She's super healthy and has a wonderfully healthy relationship with food and eating. So what I take from that is I'm going to have to pay attention forever, right, and that can be okay. I can accept that as part of the deal for being healthy.

I'm going to continue going through menopause. My body's going to change. I'm going to have to make adjustments and that's all going to be okay. But what's so great is that doesn't also mean that I need to go back to my old way of thinking of constantly obsessing about food and wanting food and resisting food and using willpower and negotiating with myself all the time. That all can go away and stay away. That's the part that really is so draining and so difficult and that part can be gone and it can be okay to still just weigh myself and go, "Okay, yeah, I'm right on target." Or, actually, I've been really convincing myself that I can have more peanut butter than I really probably should have. Need to dial it back a little. That's okay."

But you do that when you're only up a pound or two, not when all of a sudden you turn around and you're like, "Oh my gosh, I'm up 20 or 30 or 40 or more pounds and then we're repeating this whole cycle again and having to deal with the emotions that come along with that." So I just want to reassure you guys. I'm just like you. I'm just like anybody who's working on this life, right? Being a mom, being a wife, being a daughter, being a sister, all of it, being a friend. It all requires energy and effort and managing our minds and that's okay, that's part of our human experience.

Okay, today, we are going to talk about excitement and entertainment in our lives and how that relates to overeating and over drinking. So often, when my clients stop overeating and over drinking, they find that they're really pretty disappointed at the rest of their lives. They realize that for sure, the vast majority of the entertainment and excitement in their lives revolves around food. So when we take that away, they don't know what to do with themselves. They find that they're really bored or lonely or restless or irritated and they don't know what to do next besides wish that they could eat or drink to avoid all of those negative and uncomfortable emotions. So I want to start by just explaining that entertainment is a natural form of pleasure in our lives. It's completely normal. It's completely normal and healthy to want some entertainment.

A problem surfaces though when that entertainment leads to results that we don't want. Gambling is a great example especially for me because I don't like to gamble. I always think that if I want to lose money, I'll just go spend it on something so at least I have something to show for it at the end. Gambling totally stresses me out and I generally have no desire to do it. But some people do. A guy I dated in college would pretty frequently drive up to Atlantic City with his friends and gamble all night. If you like playing the slots or craps or blackjack or something, there's nothing wrong with that. But if you play to the point that the results of that playing is that you're worsening your debt or have to sell your house or drain your retirement savings and you're up all night long playing online poker, now we have a problem.

With eating, if you eat some food for entertainment or pleasure every now and then, there's nothing wrong with that. It's part of being human to get some pleasure out of your food. But if you eat to the point that the result of that eating is that you're overweight and have new health problems and have

horrible thoughts about your body and endless chatter in your brain about what to eat next, now we have a problem. So you can see the correlation, right? It's all a variation on the same thing. Gambling itself isn't a problem. It's when you over gamble that it's a problem. Eating itself is not a problem. It's when you overeat that it becomes a problem.

So many of us identify as being busy like I mentioned in the busyness podcast a few weeks ago. This is a deeply ingrained story we have about ourselves that we have families and jobs and all kinds of responsibilities which means we have no time for hobbies or exercise or things that we really enjoy doing. It's basically a whole sob story, pity party that we create in residency when we do legitimately give the hospital the vast majority of our time. Then we carry it through our attending lives. But this idea that we have no time for hobbies or fun is always a lie and I'll explain to you why.

First of all, we choose every single thing that we decide to do and not do. We don't have to do one single thing if we don't want to. But what we do choose is to take a break and eat or to procrastinate by eating or to neutralize negative emotions by eating or to zone out in front of the TV as well as eating. So if we take away the eating component because it's optional, we're left with time. Time to get the thing done that we're procrastinating about. Time to feel and process our negative emotions. Time to take a break and do something that actively de-stresses us. Time to go to bed at a reasonable hour or time to exercise or make some progress on that hobby or reconnect with a friend. Those forms of entertainment are always available to us but they're crowded out when we prioritize food entertainment. So you do have time for exercise and hobbies and friends when you choose to make or create that time.

One thing that really changed everything for me was when I learned how just looking at food or pictures of food, not only causes us to release the hormone ghrelin which makes us hungry but it also gives us a dopamine hit in our brains. So watching food shows on TV, scrolling on Pinterest and oohing and ahing over cookbooks and magazines not only legitimately made me hungrier but it made my desire for eating and overeating go through the roof. There's data on this. As you remember when you get a dopamine hit in your brain, your brain takes notice and wants you to repeat that same action again to get more pleasure. The way it drives you to do that is by increasing your desire and your urges for that thing. I found I just had this innocent little hobby but it was actually impacting my hormones in such a way that it made it even harder to resist the sweets and maintain an ideal weight.

One time, a client of mine told me that she felt bad that she still wanted to watch the Housewives mindlessly at night. I don't think there's anything wrong with that sometimes. My mindless pleasure is watching the Kardashians. I don't know. I'm sorry you guys. I can't explain it. I just like them. The issue is that what she really wanted was to watch the Housewives while drinking a few glasses of wine and having a snack, right? So she has options here. She can watch the show and just not drink and eat or if that's too difficult, she can decide to take a break from watching and do something else instead. Either one is fine. But she needs to decide what the something else could be and will be.

This is such a great opportunity to find something else that you love to do for entertainment and excitement. I personally like to turn on the Kardashians when I'm folding laundry. It turns a pretty boring activity into some entertainment for me and I never think of eating when I'm folding laundry so my brain doesn't even suggest it. It's a nice form of entertainment for me and I get to be a little productive.

As we age and all our responsibilities build up, we often really lose sight of who we even are and what we like or even want. This is not an uncommon occurrence especially for women. We're so focused on all the obligations we've taken on, like our career, raising kids, being a spouse, possibly caring for aging family members. So much so that we lose sight of who we are and what we actually enjoy in the world. We kind of take on the mindset of like I've got a job and real things I need to do. I don't have time for things I like to do. Everyone else's needs come before mine. It's that pity party again, that kind of sob story. So when we stop overeating, all the reasons why we overeat come up. For plenty of my clients they notice that they barely know what to do with themselves if they aren't having a snack or glass of wine.

I personally am always really glad when they tell me this because I think of this as such an amazing opportunity to deliberately create what you want in your life instead of just letting it happen to you. For example, if you find yourself with free time where you'd like some entertainment, you now get to pick whatever you want to do as long as you also want the results of that activity. So the opportunities are endless which is so fun. So think about what you've always wanted to do or learn or try. There's so many things that are probably lingering in the back of your mind as things that you'd like to do someday. Someday like when the kids sleep through the night or are out of the house completely or when work slows down which, PS, it never will of course. Or when you're retired.

But pushing all of that into someday means that you're left with barely any entertainment now besides food and this is how we end up overweight. I like to talk about making your food boring and your life exciting. I really like this hashtag, #boringfoodexcitinglife. When you make your food boring, you're creating so much space in your life for more excitement. All you have to do is decide what you want to choose for that excitement. You'll want to choose wisely though because you want to make sure that the results of that excitement are something you want. What we definitely don't want to do is swap one problem for another. What I mean by that is that maybe you don't overeat anymore or over drink anymore but now you're struggling with overspending because you're neutralizing your negative emotions with shopping instead of feeling them.

I worked for a while with a physician client who really liked scrapbooking but never had the time and then she had guilt and other negative feelings about herself for not keeping up with the albums for her toddler. It's like the double whammy effect in that she knew she could get some entertainment and the feeling of accomplishment, which feels great, by scrapbooking but she wouldn't prioritize working on that. Instead, she'd binge in front of the TV and eat. So we worked on her planning, one night a week where after her child went to bed, she went straight to the basement where she had all her scrapbooking stuff all laid out and she'd work on it for an hour. That was her agreement with herself.

Now, I'll tell you what I told her. I told her to expect that she'd never want to do it when the time came. What she wanted was the result of doing that scrapbooking, meaning the completed and well organized albums and the sense of accomplishment. So to create that result, she had to decide to scrapbook regularly even when she didn't want to. Time and again, she told me that the time would come, and like clockwork, she wouldn't feel like doing it in the moment but she remembered what I told her and she did it anyway and pretty often when she got started, she'd find herself getting into it and going longer than she had even promised herself. If not, she would stop after the hour is up, no big deal.

She felt amazing after each of those scrap booking sessions. She was making progress on a goal. She was prioritizing something that was important to her. She was tapping into her creativity and utilizing her brain in a totally different way than she usually did and she felt amazing about it. So think about what your scrapbooking is. What I mean by that is that it might not be scrapbooking for you. It might be reading for pleasure sometimes. It might be doing yoga before bed. It might be a different craft project. It might be Facetiming with friends that you haven't caught up with ages. It might be getting back into exercising regularly.

What I find so interesting is that many of my clients tell me that if they have time to read a book for pleasure then they really should just be doing something that gets them CME credit or volunteering for their kids' school or something like that, something that seems more productive. But what I want to offer is that those are not the same thing. Our inherent desire for entertainment and excitement is not fulfilled by doing CME work and for most of us it is not going to be fulfilled by doing school busy work either. So it's not a trade-off. But because we still want to just relax and be entertained, we end up choosing the snack and TV or computer route rather than doing the CME because somehow that seems less indulgent than reading a book or taking a class.

Now, I definitely ate plenty as entertainment. The best part of traveling was always planning out the places we'd go to eat and then eating there. Also, every date night was all about where we'd eat and what we'd eat. Interestingly, it always involved overeating and getting too full which I now understand is like taking a good thing and ruining it but I didn't understand that that's what I was doing at the time.

I also want to address other forms of food and drink related entertainment that may be getting you in trouble with your weight as well. Those include things like watching Food Network or other cooking shows, listening to food and wine related podcasts, reading food or wine related magazines or cookbooks and scrolling through Pinterest or blogs online looking for new recipes. These things were all, in one way or another, a major source of food entertainment for me. I just thought of cooking and baking and eating, of course, as my hobby. It worked out great because we needed to eat anyway and I could do it on my own time at home with the kids, even when I was on call. It felt like killing two birds with one stone, right? I got to be challenged and entertained and I got to show love by providing yummy food for my family, never mind that I ate more than my fair share of that food for sure.

It's interesting to note here that I have a great friend from residency who's hobby is cooking and baking. She loves finding new recipes and cooking all kinds of great stuff. She's always been thin and continues to be well into her 40's. She does not work out excessively or punish herself in any way to maintain that. And here's what she does: she doesn't overeat. She's one of these naturally thin people. She makes the food but then isn't eating more than her body needs. She doesn't have obsessive thoughts about food and what to make next. She's more than welcome to keep up this hobby because it's serving her. There's really no downside for her to continue entertaining herself with food.

But for those of us who have weight problems, it's a completely different story. We have to recognize how all the food entertainment makes our weight struggle even worse. For me, I had to seriously go cold turkey on all things food entertainment. I deleted all the food related shows off the DVR. No more Chopped, no more Masterchef. I unsubscribed from the food podcasts and the food blogs that I had been religiously following. I canceled the food magazines. I only went on Pinterest to find a specific recipe that I had already pinned, made and knew was good and on my plan.

I had to ban myself from searching for any new recipes on there or mindlessly scrolling of any kind for anything. I created my recipe list that we'd make our meals from which I discussed in the podcast about constraint. I packed away all the other cookbooks.

I really had to think about other forms of entertainment for myself. So I wanted to cut back on all my show watching anyway or at least the majority of it. So I decided to only set the DVR for one or two other shows which were on HGTV incidentally because there's not much food discussion on there. I found some books that I had always wanted to read and made sure they were in areas of the house where I'd find them so I would remind myself by seeing them, "Oh yeah, that's right. I could read those." I found new podcasts that I could get into. I started going to bed much earlier because if you're bored and chronically exhausted it seems like it might be a good idea to go to bed and catch up on sleep.

I basically was deliberately choosing what to expose my brain to rather than doing things to escape my brain and my thinking. So just by doing this, I reduced the amount of chatter in my brain about food so much, like a ridiculous amount. It was crazy. I was pretty shocked by how much of my brain space was being taken up by food related content. So I want to challenge you to do two things. I want you to pay attention to how much of your entertainment and excitement involves food and alcohol. If it's more than about 20%, that's very likely going to be a problem for you if you're overweight. I also want you to start dreaming again about all the things you'd love to do or try or learn if you had more time and space in your life. Pick one from that list and take some steps toward making it happen.

If you want to take a dance class, find a studio and book a class. If you want to get back into yoga, look up the schedule online and decide when you're going to go. If you want to do some non-food centered date nights, look into which concerts and shows are coming into your area and buy some tickets or research the movies that are playing. If you're feeling disconnected from your friends, write down five names of people you want to reach out to. Make a plan to write an email or text a day so by the end of the week, you've contacted each one.

Really, the sky is the limit here. I could go on and on. But what I want you to do is to work to crowd out the food entertainment in your life with other entertainment so that dropping the food entertainment isn't such a big deal. Once you've done this, let me know about what you've decided to do over in the comments in the show notes page and you can find that at katrinaubellmd.com/19. I'd love to hear about what food entertainment you're dropping and also what you're going to replace it with.

All right, my friends. Have a wonderful week and I'll talk to you soon. Take care. Bye-bye.