



WEIGHT LOSS FOR BUSY PHYSICIANS

— with Katrina Ubell, MD —

Katrina Ubell: Hey, my friend, welcome back to the podcast. I've got something really good for you today. I'm really excited to share it with you. Whenever there is something that I kind of discover or create, or a tool that I develop that is really, really helping me I cannot wait to share it with you. That's exactly what I have going on for you today. I've taught you before that our brains have a negativity bias. This is just how the human brain is. Many of us are like, "No, no, no. I don't want to be that negative person. I don't want to have this negativity bias." To that my response is, "Too bad. You already have it. You're a human being. It's how it is." This bias is why our brains will automatically show us all the possible things that can go wrong instead of what can go right. We can come up with lots of examples where this is the case.

We as physicians also strengthen that negativity bias in the work that we do. We are literally trained to go to the worst case scenario with, basically, like every possible thing. Can the common cold kill you? Yes. Can a zit kill you? Yes. Here's how. It's called a differential diagnosis. I mean, seriously, in medical school if one of your instructors asked you for the differential and you couldn't come up with how whatever the issue was could kill the person that was not good. We really, really worked hard to develop that skill and learn how to do it in a really effective way. So, that's what we've got going on in our brains us physicians. I've been thinking about ways that we can use this way of thinking that we've been trained extensively to be very good at to our advantage. We're offered a new opportunity, and we immediately start thinking about how it's not going to work or it's going to go wrong somehow, or it's the worst idea ever. This is what our brains do. You know what I'm talking about. It's not just me. It's other people, too, I know.

Also not physicians, but for sure physicians. So, it's already a strength that we have, so why not leverage it to our advantage? That's what I'm thinking, because otherwise we spend a lot of time trying to undo what we're already really good at. Usually we end up being very impatient about making progress. I see this with my clients all the time. Then, we just get frustrated and upset with ourselves and we create even more negative emotion for ourselves. It's like we're stacking the negativity. We're like, "Shoot, I'm negative about being negative, and now I'm feeling even more negative about the fact that I'm negative about being negative." Do you know what I mean? So, is it worth it to look at all of our negative thoughts and question them and decide if we want to think differently about something? For sure, absolutely, especially because most of the physicians I work with don't even realize that they're negativity is a thought that is negative. They think they're just telling me about an observation that they've made and that it's just the truth of the situation.

Like, listen to me. Call doesn't suck, okay. This is a prime example. Call is just a part of your job, that job that you're choosing to continue to show up for. Your thoughts about call are what suck. Your thoughts about call are what keeps making you feel like a wound-up ball of anxiety when it's time to take call.

But, as we were working on optimizing our minds and our thinking and doing everything we can to keep ourselves on track and stay focused on losing weight, and then once we've lost our weight then maintaining it, what if it's possible to utilize something that our brains are already super good at? That's what I've been thinking about. That's what I've been focusing on. How can I use my current brain to my own advantage? Not my brain in the future after years and years of coaching and working through things but the brain I have right now? That's my brain that I have right now, and that's your brain that you have right now.

So, I've been working on a new way of thinking about foods that create over desire and urges to eat them by the way that we think about them. Remember the intense desire to eat a cookie does not come from the cookie. So you notice how I said that. The foods don't create the over desire and urges. The cookie just sits there. That desire, that strong urge to eat the cookie comes from our thoughts about the cookie. So, these are thoughts such as, "That looks good. Um, cookies taste good. I bet that would be amazing to eat. I want that. Oh, I wish I could eat that. I deserve to eat that after what I've been through today, or this week, or this month. I haven't had a good cookie in a long time. It would be okay to have that one. Oh, that bakery makes really good cookies. Cookies are just delicious," and I could on and on, right?

If all that desire came from just seeing the food then we'd have thoughts like that about any food we see, but we don't, right? When I see an onion I'm not thinking, "I deserve to eat that after what I've been through today." Never, right? My thoughts about onions don't create intense urges for onions, and it's not that I don't like onions. Here's what's interesting. For some foods we have the opposite thoughts. So, you know black licorice, right? It's pretty polarizing. Some people love it, some people hate it. I don't think there's a lot of people who are somewhere in the middle. I think it's like you're in one camp or the other, and I am very strongly and firmly in black licorice is the worst thing that's ever been created camp. Interestingly, my husband thinks it's great and all three of my kids love it, and they think it's hilarious when they have some to come over by me and breathe in my face. I'm always like, "Ooh, gross. Get away. It's so gross." They think it's hilarious.

When someone has some black licorice I have different thoughts. I'm not thinking like, "Ooh, that's good. Ooh, black licorice, um that would taste good." My thoughts are like, "Ooh, gross, that should be banned from the Earth." But other people who like black licorice have different thoughts about it. So, it's always our thoughts that are creating that desire. Back to onions. I like onions. They're awesome, but I don't choose to think about them in a way that creates a problem for me. The main reason it's easier to think thoughts about onions that serve me is because the dopamine hit my brain gets when I eat onions is much smaller than when I eat a cookie. So, my brain doesn't reinforce me eating onions in the same way that it does me eating cookies. The way that the brain reinforces a behavior is by creating desire for us to do it again. That desire is in the form of urges and really over desire, like overemphasizing the importance of that food.

So, I see a food that gives my brain a big dopamine hit and I think thoughts about it. Sometimes we aren't even aware of what those thoughts are. This is important for you to understand because as you're working on becoming more aware of your thinking and what your thoughts are, it's very common for me to hear people say, "Well, I didn't even have a thought, I just really wanted it." All they had was the desire, they feel like. But, oftentimes we're just not even aware of what the thoughts are. They're really actually beliefs that we have. Now, beliefs are thoughts that we've thought so many times that we believe them. So, if I have a belief that cookies are amazing then I might not be aware that I'm thinking cookies are amazing on an actual conscious level.

But more in my subconscious I believe that cookies are amazing and that belief creates the desire. So, you look at the cookie, you're like, "I don't know, I didn't even have a thought, I just wanted it." Well, no, you did have a thought. It may not have been in your conscious awareness, but you did have a thought that cookies are amazing or whatever that belief is. So, desire is the feeling that that thought, or belief, creates, and that desire will feel like an urge, or a craving, or an intense wanting of the cookie, because we're just talking cookies today. The more that I let my brain tell me all about how great cookies are, and why I deserve to have one, the more intense the desire becomes. This is important to understand. But we think we're just telling the truth. We're just saying or thinking what our experience is with cookies.

But that's not what this is. What this is is an efficient way of thinking that you believe is true. This is something that many of my clients struggle with and work on a regular basis. So, I've been working on new ways to approach these situations where you see food or are exposed to food which results in a lot of desire and drama in your brain. You know what I'm talking about with the drama, the negotiations, the contemplation. "Should I have it, shouldn't I? Oh I shouldn't but I really want it." It just turns into a really big issue.

So, the last few weeks I have been working on and off at different coworking spaces because of some work we're having done on our house that made it impossible for me to work there. So, I finally settled on this one coworking space that's not particularly close to my house but it's actually for sure the best of all the bunch. In the entire bunch this is a great space. So, I've been getting a lot done here and it's been great. So what I have is my own little room with a table and a chair and there is kind of glass windows everywhere. All the offices have glass windows, so you kind of don't feel like you're alone, but you do have your own space. It's relatively quiet we'll say. But, then there's an open area, kind of like a lounge in the center with a table, and a couch, and people can sit down and eat together, or have a meeting together, and there's kind of a kitchen area, too.

Part of what they offer ... If you sign up for one of these offices, because they are not typically a day-to-day kind of a place. They lease out these offices usually on a monthly, or yearly basis. What they offer, part of the fee, is that they bring in pastries every morning. Right on the counter there is a big jar with M&Ms in it. They have one of those coffee machines that will basically make you like whatever kind of drink you could ever think of. They've got all these things. So, every time I walk to the bathroom, or come in, or leave my eyes see what's on offer for the day, and then I have thoughts, thoughts about those foods.

This is where I can really leverage my brain's automatic negativity bias, my brain's ability to tell me practically effortlessly what's going to go wrong, or what's bad about the situation. So, I've been practicing this for weeks as I've been at this coworking space. So this is what it looks like. I'm walking to the bathroom and I see some donut holes sitting on the table. My first thought, my immediate thought, is something like, "Ooh, yum." That's the automatic thought that my brain offers up. It's really a thought that will most certainly create desire and urge to eat them if I keep letting my brain basically mentally fondle the donut holes, because that's what it is. It's like, "Oh, those are good. Maybe I should eat them. Oh, I haven't had donuts in a while." Things like that, right?

So, my first intentional thought that I choose to follow, "Oh, yum," is "That won't taste good." So, my brain goes, "Um yum, donut holes," and my next thought that I intentionally think is, "That won't taste good." Then, my brain kind of responds back with, "It won't? Why not?" Then, I let my brain do its thing. Why won't it taste good? And then I have some problem solving to do. "Well, it's not fresh. It's been sitting there for a while. It's probably dried out. It's probably from a grocery store. It's definitely not the best donut. If I'm going to have donuts then I want a really good fresh one. I can have that if I want to plan for it for another day." So, this directs my brain away from thinking about eating the donuts right in front of me to the idea that I could have some really delicious ones at another time if I want them. What happens is it switches the desire from what's immediately available and right under your nose to something that's available in the future.

Chances are, honestly, if I'm being honest with myself. I'm not going to go through the trouble in a few days to plan for donuts and go out early and get them. Like maybe I will but I probably won't. If I really want to I can, but I probably won't really want to. So, the reason I won't really want to is because what creates want, what creates desire? My thinking. So, in a few days I'll most likely be thinking about other things instead of thinking thoughts that create desire for donuts. This is so incredibly effective, right? It's like, "Yeah, I totally can have donuts," but like in three days I'm not thinking about donuts. I've been doing this now for quite some time and I haven't had any desire to go get any of these pastries or any treats. This is so, so, so good.

I do it with the M&Ms, too. So, there's this big clear jar with a spoon in it and it's filled probably three-fourths of the way up with M&Ms. So, my eyes cannot help but see the bright rainbow colors when I walk by. So, I see them and my brain thinks, "Those would be good. Look, there's even a spoon in there so that people don't contaminate them with their fingers." But then right away I tell myself, "Those won't taste good," and then I think, "Really, why won't they taste good?" I answer my own question. So then I'm thinking, "Okay, why won't they taste good?" I'm thinking, "Well, you know how food coloring often kind of tastes bitter and gross? That happens with M&Ms, too. Honestly, that spoon is used by people's hands and then put right back in the jar, which is probably totally unsanitary. So, if I want to eat some chocolate I'll get myself some really good, high-quality chocolate and fully enjoy it, not just gulp down a handful of M&Ms in passing."

So, these thoughts take the desire away. I no longer am even considering eating M&Ms in the moment. I'm now thinking that maybe the next time I go to the store I could consider getting some good chocolate, but I'm working right now. I'm not going to go do that right now. By the time it comes for me to go to the store I'm not even thinking about it anymore. I don't have that desire anymore.

So, here's another example. Right where I have to turn to get to this building where this coworking space is there is a frozen custard stand. So, for those you who are not aware of what frozen custard is, it's a very big deal in Milwaukee. In other areas too, but really a big deal in Milwaukee. Frozen custard is like ice cream, it's just that regular ice cream doesn't have eggs in it, and custard does. So, as they're making the liquidy stuff that they then freeze and turn into ice cream the mix just has egg in it versus ice cream doesn't. So, for whatever reason it just makes it more richer and more delicious.

The deal here is that there's a whole bunch of these independent frozen custard stands all over the town. Everybody has like their one that they really like that they think is the best, and they are totally dedicated to that one. Or, sometimes people are willing to go to a few, but it's just kind of funny how people are like, "Oh, no, no, no, the place you have to go to is Oscar's. The place that we like is called Gilly's. There's another one that people know of called Kopp's, or places like that. Now, Kopp's has a couple different locations, and they have a location right where I turn here.

The deal with all of these frozen custard stands is that they always have at least three flavors, so it's not like going to Baskin-Robbins where there's lots and lots of flavors. What you have is vanilla, chocolate, and the flavor of the day. Now, some places will have more than one flavor of the day. Kopp's is one of those places. I think they usually have two flavors of the day. But, these are flavors that they will make just for the day and that's it. After that day when it's all gone you can't get it possibly even for months. Like sometimes it might be like once a quarter that they have a flavor, so this is how they create urgency. People love this. What's the flavor of the day? It's very exciting, right? So then people are like, "Scarcity. I have to get the flavor of the day." So, they are always interested in letting you know what the flavor of the day is.

At this Kopp's that's right where I have to turn left they have a digital sign that shows you what the flavor of the day is. My eyes land right on it as I'm waiting at the light to turn left. It's interesting to see what their flavors are. Sometimes it's easy because sometimes it's like butter pecan and that's just a "no," because nuts in ice cream, I mean "no," sorry. No. Don't even need to consider it or think about it. There is no need for me to manage my thinking or redirect my thinking about it. But then, sometimes it's something different. This morning it said chocolate peanut butter. I'm sorry, but chocolate and peanut butter it's just basically a match made in heaven, right?

So, my brain went right to, "Ooh, that would be good," and I even had a brief contemplation about bringing a quart home before I noticed what was happening. So, I noticed those thoughts that were creating desire and then I chose my next thought. On purpose I thought, "That's not a good idea." Then, my brain responded with, "Really, why not?" My brain thought it was a really good idea up until that moment, and then I had to think of reasons why it's not a good idea. I came up with these. "If I get it now it will melt."

This was like at 8:20 in the morning. You probably weren't even up then, who knows. "I have to pick up the kids and run them around town for two hours after school, so there is no way that I can get it and keep it cool enough." Sometimes chocolate peanut butter ice cream is a bit too much. It's like a little bit too rich. Then, I thought about a time when I got frozen custard and I thought the flavor would be great but it was just okay.

Then, I just decided that this would probably be the same, it would just be okay. It wouldn't even really be that good. So, I drove off and literally didn't think about the custard at all again. There was zero contemplation or negotiation about whether-or-not I should just run over there at lunch and get a cone. My brain was over it and onto the next thing.

So, you can also use this in other areas I've found, as I've been practicing this, where the line can feel a bit more blurry. So, you guys know my stance. You should plan your food in advance and if your plan for your food doesn't have ice cream on it for today than you should probably not have it, right? It's pretty easy to recognize that that's not a food that's going to be serving you. But, what can happen when we are maintaining or when we're following our plan is that there can be some little slippery slopes in there, too. So, here's an example, one that's come up for me over the course of time. So, I really don't drink caffeinated coffee anymore for a lot of reasons, mainly because I have rosacea in my eyes and, apparently, having caffeine can make it worse, and it's bad enough that I'll do whatever I need to do to try to improve the health of my eyes.

But, besides that, it's better for me to just not be on it. I like not having something that kind of drives what I need to do in the morning or I feel bad. I've been on and off caffeine enough times in my life to know how addicted I get to it and how awful I feel when I come off it, so I just am a decaf girl, for the most part. So, we just have decaf beans at home. Actually, we do have a little stash of regular just in case, but it's been sitting there a while. I don't think we really use it. But, we have one of those coffee machines that will grind the beans and create the cup of coffee for you like on demand, basically. So, the coffee is really good. It's by Jura, Jura Capresso, although I think that's pronounced Jura, because it's a Swiss company, but I don't really know. So, I call it Jura.

But, anyway, so we have decaf beans in there. So, here's the deal. Back when we drank caffeinated coffee I wouldn't drink caffeine like after noon or 2:00 in the afternoon, because then I wouldn't be able to sleep. So, it never was an issue, or something I had to think about like, "Should I have more coffee at night?" I'm definitely someone who loves a good cup of coffee after a nice meal or if I am planning for some dessert, or something, I love the bitterness of coffee to counterbalance sweetness in something, so, I do like having coffee in the evening. But, it just was never an issue because I didn't really have a great way to make decaf coffee. Well, now that we just have decaf beans in there it's really easy for me to have some decaf coffee anytime I want it, day or night.

So, what I would find my brain doing would be telling me, "Oh, well, you're kind of a little hungry after dinner, a few hours after dinner. You could just have a cup of coffee and have some cream in it." I've talked before on the podcast how I've worked really hard to have my brain interpret hunger at night to not mean that I need food, but instead to interpret it as, "Oh, this is an indication that my body is ready for sleep." But, I'm working on that, too. After literally decades of eating at night, sometimes my brain still wants to go back to the old way. So it's like, "No, but you're not eating. I mean you're just having a little decaf with cream, like you're basically fasting anyway so what's the big deal?" What I would find, though, is that I'd have one cup and then my brain would be like, "Well, I'll just have like one more because I mean, really, it's just two." It just really doesn't serve me. It's just not a good thing for me.

So, I tried that, so when my brain suggested like, "Oh, you should have some coffee with cream I just intentionally thought, "That won't taste good." My brain's like, "Really, why not?" It was kind of like, "No, I thought it would taste good." Then I just tell myself, "No, it's too much and it often doesn't taste as good as it tastes like right in the morning," like coffee tastes amazing in the morning when it's really fresh and everything. It's just really unnecessary. Tea is really just as satisfying. Then I'm like, "Oh, right, tea." I'm right onto which tea I'm going to pick out to have, so my brain is already onto the next thing. I've dropped the coffee.

So, I want you to give this a try. When you see the treats in the doctor's lounge, or the surgeon's lounge, or the break room, or on your kitchen counter experiment with this tool. Let your brain do it's thing. I find that all I have to do to get the ball rolling is to quickly think, "That won't taste good," or something to that effect. Then, when my brain questions that, it's like, "Really, why not?" Then I get to work coming up with the answer. It's kind of like when you have little kids, or you're around little kids, and you tell them something and they respond back with "Why?" And then you have to come up with something convincing on the fly. That's like, basically, what you're doing. You're like, "Ah, let me think of the answer right now." So, you can totally do it. Now, I do have to say I have not been in a situation where I couldn't come up with a reason that was convincing enough for myself.

If you're having a hard time one thing you could try is literally the, "Because I said so," line that we sometimes use with kids and see how it works for you. But, be really careful to not have it be, "Because I said so," like in a mean, degrading way. Say it to yourself in a kind, loving, supportive, protective way. "Because I said so," like just "I've got you, just trust me on this one." So, I really think this is going to be a game changer for so many of you. It really has for me. I've been so shocked at how well it's worked, so give it a try and then let me know how it's going for you over on the show notes page for this episode. You can find that at katrinaubellmd.com/130, 1- 3-0.

All right, have a wonderful week, and I will talk to you next time. Take care. Bye-bye.