



WEIGHT LOSS FOR BUSY PHYSICIANS

— with Katrina Ubell, MD —

Katrina Ubell: Well, hello there my friend, welcome back to the podcast. And if you are new today, welcome. I'm so glad you're here. I have a really good episode for you today, especially if you are somebody who does any kind of extended fasting or even not extended fasting, just fasting at all for religious reasons. This is an episode that I've had on my mind for quite some time. I'm really excited to bring it to you.

So I have been working with clients who fast for religious reasons for years, and it comes up again and again, and last year during the month of Ramadan, I actually made a note to myself that I wanted to create a podcast in anticipation of Ramadan 2021. And so I had this scheduled and just decided to push it up a little bit because I was recently coaching one of my amazing clients and she's of the Bahai faith and she was talking about how she was going to be starting on a 19-day fast. And we were talking about the similarities to Ramadan and just different things, different issues that come up. And I thought, "You know what? Actually all the major religions to various degrees participate in fasting as a holy ritual." And so if you are somebody who participates in that or struggles with that, then I know that what I'm going to offer today is going to be helpful for you no matter what faith you take part in.

And even if you're not somebody who fasts for religious reasons, you might still pick up on something that is interesting for you just based on what I'm about to offer. So let us dig in. Like I said, all of the major religions encourage fasting in some way, shape or form. That doesn't mean that everybody who is a member of that faith or identifies as part of that faith does the fasting, but this is considered a normal thing. When people often talk about fasting, they're like, "Is this just like an eating disorder like in disguise? What's the deal here?" And no, fasting, true fasting is something that is considered actually a really holy and spiritual practice. So, the way people fast for religious reasons is super variable, of course, as you can imagine. I'm going to be talking about the kind of fast, where you are not able to eat anything from sunrise until sunset. So if the kind of fasting that you participate in is a shorter time period, then just take what I'm about to offer and just shorten that period where you don't eat.

Now, some people do that extended fast. They do the fast from dawn until sunset, and they are allowed to have some water in-between or maybe consume a little something and there are plenty of people who don't. So that's no food, no water. Like it's nothing, you're NPO. You don't get anything during that time. And I just wanted to mention that because if you're able to drink water, I do think that it improves the tolerability of the extended fast, especially depending on what time of year you're doing this and where you live.

Because if it is the time of year where the days are really long and the nights are really short, that's a long time to go without drinking anything. So if you are someone who can drink during that time, then one of my biggest recommendations is to be just pumping yourself full of water, just hydrating, hydrating, and hydrating.

The more you can keep your intravascular volume up, the more you'll feel good during this time, the better you will feel. Now, if you are not someone who is able to have water, then of course you're going to want to sort of like pre-drink, like pre-hydrate in anticipation of the several hours, which could be upwards of 14, 15 or more hours. Depending on where you live, depending on North or South you are, could be even more than that. So, what I recommend is that in the morning before dawn, that you drink a lot of water, of course. Now, some people, some of my clients will ask me, "Well, I don't usually have breakfast anyway, because I do intermittent fasting anyway, and so I just eat two meals a day, usually lunch and dinner. So I'm not hungry in the morning. I don't really want to eat in the morning. Should I make myself eat something if I'm going to be fasting all the way until dinner? What should I do?"

I want to preface this by saying that what you need to do is you need to listen to your body and you need to experiment until you figure out what is going to work best for you, because every person is going to be different. And I can't possibly know how your body functions best. So, I'm going to give you some ideas, some things that you can play around with and consider and practice until you are able to then figure out, "You know what, my body seems to feel the best when I consume things in this way." So in the morning, you may decide you want to have some straight fat basically, just some fat to give you some energy. This is for people who are what we call fat adapted, meaning that your body is happy to utilize your fat stores for energy for you. But if you're feeling extra hungry, you have the fat, the fat doesn't make your insulin levels go up very much. It just gives you a little extra energy so that you can continue on.

So, many people will be intermittent fasting, and they'll allow themselves to have coffee with a little bit of cream, just that straight fat can kind of help them get through that fast a little longer. And if you have a small amount, that's not considered actually breaking your fast. But the thing here is that, is our goal really to have this extended fast every day for the entire time, right? Like if you're doing it for a whole month or you're doing it for 19 days, do you really need to be eating only one meal a day for that extended period of time, especially if that's something that you don't do on a regular basis? Now, there is a whole movement out there of people who love eating just one meal a day, it's abbreviated OMAD and they think it's great and they love it. And if you are that person and you love it and it totally serves you, then I'm all on board. I think that's great for you.

I will tell you though, that in my experience, anybody who has any kind of issues with emotional eating or eating for non-hunger related reasons, I find over the course of time has trouble keeping that up. I don't find that one meal a day is a great long-term solution for pretty much everybody that I've worked with for the most part. Of course, there's going to be exceptions and that's why I say if it's working for you and you love it and you feel amazing and you have no brain chatter and you're just feeling top of the world, then great, go ahead and do that. But most people don't want to do that.

So we have to ask ourselves, do we really want our religious fast to be a one meal a day kind of a thing that might turn into some urge-driven eating or some bingeing when we are able to eat or are we willing to offer our bodies a little bit more food? And so, I would suggest that if you're deciding not to do just the one meal a day, that if you really don't have the stomach for eating like steak and eggs, or like something like really intense or heavy breakfast, then you might want to just consider having more straight fat meaning like having some avocado or some people even eat a couple of cubes of cream cheese or something like that. Something that is just much more like straight fat.

Now, if you are somebody who feels amazing doing that, then great. If you're not, you might be someone who's like, "You know what? I just feel so sluggish, even though I know I'm fat-adapted, by the end of the day, I just don't feel good." Then maybe you want to consider having some carbohydrate before dawn, like having some fruits, something maybe with some fiber in it, or having some brown rice or having some potatoes that have the skin on them so that you're getting some fiber in that way. Something that's just going to kind of give you a little bit more energy.

And then also, if you're somebody who knows that you just feel so much better when you eat a little higher protein diet, then maybe what you should be having as an egg or two, and then maybe that would be something that would feel really good. You know that wouldn't really fill you up or make you feel like too full or sluggish in the morning, but would give you a little bit of extra energy to be able to make it all the way until sunset and you're able to eat your meal.

I also want to mention something else and that is salt intake. And some people tend to be more salt and fluid sensitive than others. When you are not eating, your insulin levels are low and that can actually lead to some sodium wasting by your kidneys. And depending on just how your body functions, you may find that particularly without drinking anything throughout the day, by the time sunset rolls around, you're actually feeling low on fluid, right? You're feeling like your intravascular volume is low and that can really contribute to you feeling crummy, like crabby, definitely just wanting to eat anything or consume something like you can definitely feel harder.

So what I would suggest is that if you are eating something in the morning or when you're eating something in the morning before dawn, that you consider salting and maybe possibly even heavily salting that food that you're having. So that could look like just sprinkling salt on your avocado. Something like that can be really, really helpful. If you find that that's not enough, or you find that you just can't stomach the salt in the morning, like for some people that just doesn't sit right first thing, they do actually sell sodium chloride tablets that you could consider experimenting taking. And then of course drinking tons of water with that. And then I am going to follow that up by saying, of course, I'm not giving you medical advice here. You would definitely want to check with your doctor first before trying this. This would presume that you have normal kidney function and that this would be a good idea for your body. If you're on any medications where this could conflict, of course you're going to want to get some medical advice.

So my suggestions here are not medical advice in nature. It's purely just something to think about and to consult with your health expert in your life. Okay? So the salt tablets, the point of that is that is you're able to get more salt in your body than might taste palatable to you to actually eat it.

And of course you want to drink tons and tons of water with that. That can just help to keep your intravascular volume up and might make it so that you just feel a little better throughout the day when you're not able to drink.

Okay. So then we have our day, we get through our day. What I would suggest is that if it starts feeling hard, for whatever reason that you really stay connected to the purpose of the fast, because the purpose of the fast isn't just like this thing you wanted to try, right? The whole point of it is a religious reason. And so, if you find that it's helpful to maybe re-up, refresh your knowledge on the purpose of the fast, like why you're even doing it. Maybe there's some other learning or study that you can do that can help you to stay really connected to that religious purpose, then that can help you when your brain starts telling you stories about like, "This is dumb." Or, "Poor me." Or, "Why am I doing this? When is this going to be over?" Like just making the experience of it harder than it has to be.

So remember, there's a reason you're doing it and make sure you're really well aware of what that is and whatever you need to do to bring that to the forefront of your mind that's going to help you with managing your thinking around it. Okay. So then we get to sunset and we're allowed to eat. Now, for many cultures, what is traditional is that you break the fast by eating a date, a fresh or a dry date or possibly drinking some water. I would suggest for sure that you should drink some water because the more dehydrated you are, the more your urges will strengthen, right? You'll have strong urges. And also hunger can feel really, really strong and intolerable when you are dehydrated. So I would just plan on drinking tons of water.

The date, I think I've heard all kinds of different reasons why people eat the date. Some people talk about it kind of like priming the GI track to be ready to eat some food. For this, I would really defer to what your connection is to the date. I know for a lot of people's tradition, but it's not necessarily something that's religious necessarily. And of course, dates are like nature's candy, right? So it's like a big insulin boost right there. But if you really are somebody who struggles with having GI issues after not eating all day and then finally eating a meal, then if you have to do that, then I would just plan for that and see if there's a way that you can maybe wean yourself off of that or find a meal that actually sits better in your stomach when you do eat so that you maybe don't need that priming effect of the date.

So, now it's time to eat. So I have a few things to offer to you about this. Oftentimes, it's not hard to not eat when you're not allowed to eat, right? People will say, "I have no problem not eating. I don't even think about it between sunrise and sunset, but the minute the sun sets, the chatter is incessant." You have to first understand where that's coming from. Your body's like, "Hey, you haven't eaten all day. You should probably eat." That seems important and it's concerned like, "Why haven't you eaten anything? You should probably go and eat if there's food around." So it's just that it's just a survival type of a thing.

Now, if you're somebody who struggles with binge-eating anyway, you might find that that part of you that wants to use an excessive amount of food to feel better is totally coming in there and voicing its opinion about everything. And what I suggest that you do is that you really get to know that part of you. Like really move toward it, so that you develop a relationship where you can reassure that part of you that's afraid that you really need more food.

"You're okay. It's totally fine. I've got us. I'm totally going to consume an adequate amount of food. There's no need to overeat in an intense or extreme way."

I do also recommend that you preplan out what you're going to eat. That can help a lot. If you've made decisions in advance, then you're not in the moment going, "What am I going to have?" Now, oftentimes it's big gatherings, the get together, it's like very social kind of a thing to eat for some people. And right now in COVID times that might not be happening so much, but this podcast will live on for hopefully well past COVID times. And so that might be something that comes up. I think it still makes sense for you to plan out what you're planning to have. Even if you don't know exactly what's going to be there, you can look at it in terms of food groups. Like, "I'm definitely going to eat a bunch of vegetables. I'm definitely going to keep myself hydrated. I'm going to have some protein." Whatever that is. So maybe you decide like, "I'm not going to have whatever the sweets are that are there." You just decide it in advance so you're not making decisions in the moment.

So preplan that food, and then of course allow yourself to make some changes like sometimes we're like, "I just want to know exactly how the whole month is going to go or the whole stretch of time and what exactly I'm going to eat." I think you have to leave room to check in with yourself and how you're feeling. So maybe the first week you've been doing it a certain way and that's been feeling pretty okay. But by the second week, whatever's happening with hormones or maybe how you're sleeping or like what your call has been like or just whatever it is, you just aren't feeling as good. And so it's important to give yourself that opportunity to reconsider all of it. Let me try something different and see if that helps. And just being open to trying different things in the desire to support your body in the best way that you possibly can.

Okay. So it comes time to eat and what I want to recommend is that even though you're probably very, very hungry at this point, do your best to slow down, taste your food, enjoy the food. What we don't want to do is inhale it, pack it down super fast and then feel like, "Oh my gosh, that's my only chance to really eat. I need to eat more, because I barely even tasted that." So really try to do your best to be mindful, to slow down, to know that more is coming. You don't have to pack it all down super super fast. So just chewing your food, put your fork down, whatever you need to do to slow down and taste it and really enjoy it.

I also want to suggest that there's different ways to approach this. Now, some people will eat a few times in the evening. I think it all depends. If you go to bed with this massively full belly and then you're not sleeping well, and you're waking up with like the... Some people call them meat sweats, like in the middle of the night because you're just feeling so bad, then that's not going to be so great for you. But I do think that especially depending on when sunset is time-wise, you might want to consider trying eating two smaller meals over that time before you go to bed or just having one larger meal. If you have one larger meal, maybe you eat to a little bit more of a level of fullness than you would typically, like there's a certain level of satiety where you're like, "Yeah, I'm satisfied. That was enough. I had enough, I can make it until several hours till the next meal."

But in this case, since you're essentially going to be eating for most of the... For your 24 hour period, maybe you eat until a little bit fuller than that. You're going to have to kind of see, because what I find is that the more you don't overeat and the more connected you get to your body, the less good it feels to overeat.

I know for myself back in my Weight Watchers days, I would eat these massive salads and just feel so distended and overly full. But I thought that that was a normal amount of fullness because I didn't have any points left. I wanted to make sure I wasn't too hungry before bed or whatever. It was massive scarcity, but I thought that was a normal amount of fullness. And I thought that was a normal feeling.

As I learned to recalibrate that, now I really, really don't like how it feels to eat more food than my body needs. So, you're going to have to check in with yourself on that, which of those maybe works better? But what I don't suggest that you do is that you're just like grazing for hours, right? Have a plan for yourself, decide what you're going to do. And then when your brain wants to offer up thoughts about how you should do something different, all you have to do is follow what your plan was. You can thank it for the offer and you dismiss it. It's just really, what it has to say is not relevant.

Okay. So then finally, what we need to then do is manage our thoughts, right? Because it's really easy to have a lot of deprivation thoughts, scarcity thoughts, thoughts about feeling restricted. And like, "This is your chance. The deprivation has lifted. You are free of your restrictions. The food is plentiful, so I need to eat all of it." And you might be around a lot of people who look at it that way. Maybe you were raised looking at it that way, or people talking about it in that way. And so if that's the case, then you're going to want to be really careful about what you're thinking and what thoughts you have about this whole experience that contribute to your over desire to eat more food than is necessary or food that doesn't serve your body.

So, I would suggest that you just take some time to think about what have people talked about around me or what ways have I thought and believed about not eating and then how you eat when you are allowed to eat up until this point and which of these are ones that serve me and which of these are ones that create a feeling of intense desire to eat a lot of food. Like what actions do those feelings create when you think those thoughts, and those would be ones to be on the lookout for and ones to substitute out with a different thought that's going to encourage you more to take actions that are truly in service of you. So the important thing to remember is that unless you're going for several, several months, your body has plenty of fat stores. Even if you're thin, even if you're at a normal weight, your body has plenty of fat stores.

So you don't have to worry that you're not going to be okay. I would much rather you focus on feeling as good as you possibly can during this time. Like how can I eat in a way that really makes me feel good, right? Because the whole purpose of it is this religious or spiritual connection. Let's stay focused on that part and not make the whole thing about food if possible.

So that's what I have to offer to you on religious fasting. Remember, there's no right or wrong way. And you really are able to and encouraged to just rethink things if the way you do it every year or however often you do it isn't totally serving you, that's totally okay. We can figure out a different way to do it. We just have to be willing to experiment, to have things not work that great in order to figure out what are the things that work really, really well for you so that this is something that is not a time where you are then ending up gaining a bunch of weight out of overeating like crazy.

Okay. All right. So, if you're somebody who fasts for religious reasons, you can do this. I know you probably already do it anyway, but you can do this in a way that doesn't involve a ton of overeating as well. I know you can do it. It's totally worth it, especially if you're someone who fasts on a regular basis. It's worth it to do this work to figure out what's the best way for you.

All right. I hope you have a wonderful rest of your day and I will talk to you next time.