



WEIGHT LOSS FOR BUSY PHYSICIANS

— with Katrina Ubell, MD —

Katrina Ubell: Well, hello there, my friend. I am so glad you're here. Thank you for joining me again today on this episode of the Weight Loss for Busy Physicians podcast. I'm so glad you're here. I have a great episode for you. We have another installment of the Back to Basics series today. We're going to be talking about the hunger scale, which is super, super important, and you will not want to miss this one. Even if you think you already know about the hunger scale, you probably will want to listen again. It will be a good refresher for you. And if you're new to this work and new to what I teach, you're definitely going to want to dig into this episode. Just a reminder, this Back to Basics series is the best way for you to get yourself back those basics. If you've been listening for a long time and you want to refocus back in on what you want to be focusing on, then these episodes are great. If you are new to the podcast and new to my work, then this is a great place to start.

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I really wish that podcast apps were a little bit more searchable. I found myself that sometimes it can be hard, and they're all different, and who knows when you're listening to this, maybe they'll be even better. Maybe they'll be searchable. Maybe they'll have that as one of the new features, but for the time being, when this is coming live, we don't have too much of that going on. All right. Let's talk about the hunger scale. Now, the hunger scale holds a special place in my heart mostly because it is where I started when I lost my weight for the last time. And I didn't really realized that that was what was going on when I started doing it, but it was something that really changed everything for me. And what I love about it is that you literally don't need anything. Not one thing. You need your body, which you are already inhabiting, and that's it. You don't have to be eating a certain way. You don't need to have food prepared in a certain way. You don't need special equipment. You don't even need a plan. You don't need anything. All you need is your attention. You need your brain and its ability to pay attention to things. I started with the hunger scale really honestly as kind of a little challenge for myself. It's kind of part challenge, part curiosity of like, "I wonder what would happen if I do this," and it really changed things so much.

What is the hunger scale? Ultimately, what the hunger scale is it's a way for you to tap into the messages that your body is always sending you and has been sending you and will continue to send you about what your body needs and also what it doesn't need. What that means is that when you are born, barring you having a rare genetic problem, your body already knows when you need food and when you no longer do. And as a pediatrician, this was just never more obvious to me than in the patients I took care of and also with my own children just seeing how babies want to eat when they're hungry and they don't want to eat when they're not hungry. And can you over feed a baby? Yes, you can. But, then they're sucking just for comfort and they're not actually sucking and swallowing the milk because they are actually hungry.

We come factory installed with this information. All of us have this, again, barring you having some sort of rare metabolic issue. When I say that this is what I started with, let me explain what that means. What this means is that what came into my awareness was the concept that you could just eat when you're hungry and not eat when you're not hungry. Now, that may sound extremely obvious and like, "Duh, Katrina," but I want to let you know that for 40 years prior to that or let's say maybe 37 because at some point I kind of lost that connection to my body signals, I ate for other reasons. Growing up, we ate because it was time to eat. The meal was served. School said it was time for lunch or snack time, or whatever it was. I can't tell you the number of times that I was arguably forced to eat breakfast as a kid when I was not hungry. In fact, I even felt kind of nauseous and I felt sick and occasionally even threw up as a kid after eating breakfast when I really didn't want it.

I just really learned to not listen to what my body said. What my body signals were did not factor into the equation about eating or not eating. It was not relevant and so I completely ignored it and it just, "Who cares? It doesn't matter." That's the hunger side. On the fullness side, I was raised in a family where you needed to clean your plate, and so fullness really didn't matter. And also, I had a sweet tooth, and on a certain level, I was emotionally eating even as a child, which meant that if I was already satisfied with what I'd eaten for dinner, if I still wanted dessert, I would eat it anyway, whether I was actually needing food or not.

I'm on both ends, the hunger side and the fullness side. It really didn't factor in. I mean, of course, I knew what it was like to be excessively overly full and that maybe I didn't like how that felt, but even so, it just was not something that entered into my awareness at all. And then, when I was in my practice, well, first of all, let's back up to medical school. Once you're on the wards, once you are actually doing the doctoring, the first thing you're taught is you need to eat when you have the opportunity to eat. Again, doesn't really matter if you're hungry or not, you need to eat. And it doesn't really matter if you're not that hungry, you should eat a lot because you don't know when you're going to be able to eat later. You need to eat now to prevent hunger that you might experience in the future.

And then, of course, I was using food to help myself feel better, to reward myself, to treat myself, to just have any kind of fun or pleasure or enjoyment in my life during residency and through all that training. And it just compounded and built upon itself. And when I did feel hunger, it also felt very intense. It felt like a problem that needed solving immediately. And so, I would snack and eat whatever. And then, if it was time to eat again later and I wasn't hungry, it didn't matter, I ate anyway. That's where I was coming from with this. And I would imagine that at least to some extent you can resonate with at least some parts of that story.

Maybe you aren't quite as disconnected from your hunger as I was, but there's probably some disconnection there. And so, what ended up happening was I became aware of this idea that if I wasn't hungry, that I didn't have to eat. Where this came up mostly for me was that I would go to work all day, eat lunch, then I would finish up with patients. And in our practice, we really just kept seeing people. For a long time, we really just kept seeing people until everyone who'd called had been seen, so often we were working late. Luckily toward the end of my tenure there, things had started changing and we were referring more to urgent care, but you really never knew when you were going to be done with work. And so, I'd finish up seeing patients and I still, of course, had a stack of charts to work through and phone calls to make and all that stuff. And I'd try to catch up at lunch, but didn't matter, there was always a pile there.

And of course, I was totally hungry because it was time to eat dinner. And so, I would end up snacking most of the time. Especially if I had a lot to do, I just knew I'm not going to be home for a while so I need to eat something. And so, I had a hard time understanding the concept of snack, like to just knock the edge off the hunger and still then be hungry. I would tell myself, "Oh, I just have a little bit," but then I would end up eating more to the point where the hunger really went away and I felt more satisfied, which meant that I really was not hungry at all anymore. So then I would get home and my family needed to eat, and so I would still cook a full meal and eat it. Or if my family had eaten, I'd come home and think, "Well, I need it. Have some nutrition. I need to actually eat something that has vitamins in it," so then I would eat anyway.

What this ultimately came down to, the hunger scale, was recognizing like, "You know what? If I'm not hungry and everyone's eating, maybe I could just not eat. What would that be like?" Now, of course, my initial thoughts were like, "That's craziness. The kids are going to be totally worry that something's going wrong." "Why is she not eating?" "They're going to start having disordered eating because I'm not eating." I had all the drama in my brain about what would happen. I thought, "You know what? Let me just try it and see." That's one thing about me. I may have all the doubts and all the objections, but I'm always like, "Well, I mean, I guess I could try it. Fine." Maybe reluctantly, but I still will try it. So, I thought, "Okay, I'm going to do this." I came home from work one day and I checked in with my body. "Do I actually feel physical hunger?" And the answer was no, solidly did not feel hungry. I thought, "Okay, well, maybe I'm just not going to eat."

What I decided to do was to sit down with a family and not eat, but still engage with everybody like it was a meal time. We still talked about things. It was actually surprisingly really great. When someone needed to refill their water glass, I was happily, "I'll hop up and get you that," or someone spilled something, "No problem. I'll get that all cleaned up." Some of my children were pretty young back then, I would find myself sometimes eating my food really fast because they needed help and whatever, and then it would be the meal would be over and I hadn't even barely tasted it. And I would go back and get seconds because I wanted the meal to still go on. I wanted to get more pleasure out of the meal. And so, I found like, "Oh my gosh, I don't have to do any of that." I'm not racing to get through the meal. I just get to enjoy hanging out with my family, talking to them, and enjoying their company.

What did the family say that? Well, two of the kids didn't even notice or say anything. I told my husband what I was going to do. He didn't care. He was like, "Yeah, that sounds like a smart thing to do." And then, my son who, how old was he? Maybe eight or nine at the time.

My oldest son, he did ask like, "Oh, why aren't you eating?" I said, "Oh, I'm just not hungry right now." He was like, "Okay," literally did not even faze him, because that's normal to a kid. A kid who eats when they're hungry and stops when they're satisfied. It's like, "Right, then you shouldn't eat when you're not hungry." Now, I did have a deal with myself that it wasn't like, "Well, this was my chance, and I couldn't eat later." I told myself, "Just don't eat now. And if you get hungry later, then you can have dinner later, or you can wait till the morning. Whatever you want to do is completely fine."

I felt like I had all the leeway to test this out. I didn't feel like I was setting myself up to be in a bad situation or not getting my needs met. I just thought I'm just going to go into this really with an open mind just to see what the experience could be like. And what I noticed, besides all the other things I've already told you, is that I felt so good that I wasn't overly full. I felt like really physically well in my body. And I thought, "Oh, that is fascinating." I lost my first 10 pounds just by following the hunger scale. I did not change anything I ate. I still was eating all the things, but I only ate when I was hungry and I stopped eating when I was satisfied.

Now, notice that I don't say necessarily "full." Because, for me, full meant too full, too much food. There was a whole recalibration that had to happen once I really understood the hunger scale. Let me explain to you the way I look at this. I think of it as a number line, where on the left side, you have -10. In the middle, you have zero, and on the right side, you have +10. Minus 10 is hunger, the negative side is hunger. Positive side is fullness. And on the negative side, -10 is like you're ready to gnaw your arm off. It's seriously a problem. You're extremely hungry. Zero is just in the middle. You're not hungry, you're not satisfied, you're just kind of neutral. And +10 is the most full you could have ever even imagine. You're thinking maybe I need to actually vomit because this is just too much. We've got the extremes on either end.

I think of it like -1 is just that first little hint of hunger. Minus two is like, "No, I'm getting kind of hungry, but it's not enough that I want to actually get up and go to do something about it." And then, once we start moving towards -4, -4 is when you're like, "I'm hungry and I'm hungry enough that I'm willing to get up and actually prepare myself something. I need to go and make myself some food because I'm hungry." On the other side, +1 is when you're like, "Hmm, I'm just starting to feel just the first inkling of being satisfied." Plus two is like, "I'm feeling pretty good, still, really, really energetic." I think of it like I'm not hungry. I'm starting to feel satisfied and I could still go run around the block. Definitely not feeling any, like I'd be burping it up or it's too full. I feel like a very light meal would create that.

And then, once we move towards +4, +4 is totally satisfied, feeling in a great place. And I wouldn't really want to run around the block, but I could totally go take a walk around the block. I would feel energetic enough and feeling good in my body. I can definitely go and move. Once I start getting into +5 and +6, I always think of it is like when you've had a little too much and you kind of lean back and take a deep breath and you might even push your hand down on your belly a little bit, make a little room. You're like, "Oh, I need a little space." That's where we're getting to when we're too far. Or, thinking about it like, "Well, I don't want to take a walk right now, give me an hour to digest then I'll go take a walk." That was a little too much. And so, then of course, it extrapolates from there being progressively more and more full and of course progressively more and more hungry.

Now, the good news is when you get your body functioning the way a human body should function, it's extremely unusual for you to ever feel hungrier than a -4. That's really good news. If you're feeling like sometimes your hunger is extremely intense and you really need to handle it immediately, that is a different issue that we need to adjust. We need to move you from being a sugar burner to a fat-adapted body so that your body is like, "Oh, hey, cool. We need some energy and you're not going to eat. That's totally no big deal. I'm going to go access your fat stores and create some energy." That is where we're functioning from.

I remember thinking like, "Well, I don't know what any of these numbers feel like. Let me kind of see." People often ask, "Well, isn't this totally subjective?" And the answer is yes, it is, but it's subjective to you. You do need to be willing to take the time to sort out how you're going to define these numbers for yourself. Some people for -4, they say like, "Okay, my stomach's definitely growling." Well, for me, personally, sometimes my stomach will growl when I'm hungry, but a lot of times it doesn't. So, having that as an indicator isn't something that's reliable for me, but it might be for you.

Some people will feel like there's a certain gnawing that they feel in their belly. Some people might feel ever so slightly weak, or the slightest little bit of a headache coming on. When you start to actually tap into your body going, "How do I feel right now? Do I need food? Am I hungry," you start to notice what your body actually feels like. This is important because what most of us are doing is living up in our heads and we're thinking, "I don't know, am I hungry?" And the answer to that is not a thought. You don't need to think about it, right? What you need to do is check in with your body. So, you need to move out of your head and into your body and find out what is the signal your body is sending right now in terms of whether it's needing food or not.

So, very important for you to understand, this is something that you're going to have to practice. And the clients that I've worked with who are willing to do that and really figure out what it feels like for themselves, I just find that their weight loss process tends to go so much faster and is easier. I've had many clients who are like, "Listen, I am eating totally on plan and I'm totally in a plateau and stuck. And I don't know what's going on." And I'm like, "Okay, tell me about your hunger scale." They're like, "Oh yeah, I'm at least a +5 every time I finish eating." "Okay, there we go. It's still too much food." What we're doing is just listening to what the body's already telling you. It already knows how much food you need. And so, the cool thing this is that you don't need to count any kind of points or macros or anything like that.

You don't need to weigh or measure anything because this information is already there for you. You just have to learn how to interpret it. And I want to say relearn, because you knew this early on and at some point in your life, you got disconnected from it. And that's totally fine. We just need to reconnect to it. Your body already knows how much food you need. You just need to relearn your ability to listen and your ability to interpret what that means. And so, what that means is that sometimes, especially in the beginning, you might not get it right the first time you try, and I want to encourage you to be willing to not get it right and to keep persevering and learning from it until you figure it out for yourself.

If you try it once or twice and you're like, "I don't know, I can't figure this out," and then you just stop, that's not going to get you permanent weight loss. You have to be willing to go and figure it out for yourself. I described for you what I use as my internal barometer.

And what's really cool is that over the course of time, you can relearn. What feels normal to you becomes -4 to +4. Whereas for me before, it was probably more like a -6 or -7, and then eating to a +6 or +7. When I was a lifetime member of Weight Watchers, they would have vegetables as "free," meaning that you didn't have to count those as points. And so, I would end up eating these massive salads every night out of fear that after that meal, if I got hungry, there wouldn't be anything else to eat because my points were all gone.

I'm such a rule follower. I wasn't just like, "Oh, well, maybe my body needs more food. I could eat it. Who cares if it counts for another point?" I was going for the A, wanted to follow the plan. And so, I'd be so afraid I'd be hungry later, I would eat these enormous salads and I would feel so stuffed at the end of it. It was not a nice, satisfied feeling. It was an overly full feeling, but that became normal to me. I thought that's when you stopped eating was when you felt that way. We have to recalibrate all of this and recognize, "You know what? That is too much." On the flip side, sometimes, we have to go, "You know what? You're not losing weight and you think you're eating to a +4. Let's try having you eat to a +3 and see what happens. See how you feel." Maybe what you think is a +4 is actually a +5 for you, and at a +3, you are actually satisfied and you can go several hours before the next meal.

You just didn't know that you could eat less and still feel really, really good. What happened to me over the course of time is I started of realizing how much better I felt my body when I stopped eating at the appropriate time. I just thought it was normal to feel like I needed to burp a lot and I was really, really full eating salad. And honestly, if you've been overeating a lot and it just feels normal, you're like, "No, I don't overeat," but you know if you overeat based on what shape your body is in. If you are in a place where you're at your ideal weight, then you know you're eating as much food as your body needs no more, no less.

If you are finding that your body's overweight, then you are consuming more food than your body needs. It's just a fact, right? So, what we need to do is recalibrate all that. Now, sometimes as you lose weight, you need to recalibrate this again. Depending on how much weight you have to lose and what your habits have been, you might find that you get the hunger scale dialed in, and then maybe you lose 20 pounds, 30 pounds, 40 pounds, and you go, "You know what? Now my body's different, I think I don't need as much food," and it totally makes sense. Your body's smaller, it's going to need less. Now, when you're going through this, what often happens is that we have thoughts come up. Of course, I want to address those as well because what comes up for a lot of us and it came up for me too was kind of this level of disappointment, of like, "Wow, this really kind of sucks. I don't get to eat as much food as I'm used to eating. I don't really like that much."

Some people start to feel feelings of deprivation. Some people feel self pity. They will feel like literally sorry for ourselves that we don't get to eat more. We're really missing the comfort and the companionship that we got from food. And I want you to know if that's coming up for you, that's all very, very normal. But, the other thing I want you to know is that those are issues that come from your thoughts, not from how much food you're eating. It's not that you need to eat more food or that it actually is sad that you don't get to eat more food. It's that you need to look at your thoughts and your beliefs that are creating those emotions.

Deprivation doesn't come from you not getting enough food. Deprivation is a feeling that comes from you thinking deprivation thoughts. "This isn't enough food." When you think that, you feel deprived. But if your body is responding well, then we know that it is enough food and we just have to change our minds about what is enough food. Depending on how you've been eating for a very long time or even your whole life, it will potentially surprise you, that you don't need as much as you thought. Now, here's the thing. If you gobble your food down and barely taste it, yeah, you'll have thoughts of like, "Oh, for me, I wish I could have more." Or, what you could do is change your thinking and also maybe decide, "I still want to get some pleasure out of my food, maybe I should slow down. Maybe I should actually taste this. Maybe I shouldn't be gobbling it down so fast." "Maybe I'm making myself eat food that I don't even really like. If I'm going to eat, then maybe I should eat food that tastes good to me." That's what we need to be focusing on.

That's where coaching often can really come in handy to work through those thoughts that you have about what's happening as you're following the hunger scale. How do you actually do this? You just move, like I said, out of your head into your body and check in. "Are you hungry?" If the answer is yes, ask yourself, "How do I know? What am I experiencing in my body that makes me think that I'm hungry?" So interesting to find out. The other thing I want to point out is that very often if you're not drinking enough water, you will feel hungrier than if you do. And not because you're trying to fill your belly up with water, but because you already dehydrated.

And what I know from working with literally hundreds and hundreds, over a thousand, well over a thousand doctors is that most people don't drink enough water. I would strongly suggest that as you're doing this, you also really double down on your water consumption so that you're even more likely to be able to truly believe what the hunger scale is telling you. Now, of course, if you are willing to move into taking a break from eating flour and sugar, you'll find that the hunger scale calibrates even better. That's the absolute best way to really find out what your body needs because eating the sugar and flour can make things a little more wacky, but we're just starting with the basics here. This is the first thing we can do and you don't need to change what you're eating at all.

But, I do suggest that you drink, you don't have to be guzzling... I was thinking of those body builders who walk around with a gallon jug of water. It doesn't have to be that, but you probably need you to be drinking twice as much water as you're drinking right now. Or, if you're drinking a ton of diet soda or a ton of coffee or tea or things like that, put some water in there too. Mix it up and get that in there as well and hydrate yourself, and that will make a big difference as well for you.

You're checking in, "Am I hungry or not?" If the answer is yes, how do you know? And if you do that again and again, you'll start to really understand those body signals better. You'll start to be able to interpret them. "Okay, I am actually hungry and this is why. This is how I'm feeling in my body." "Okay, on the scale, what number would I put to it?" If it's just -1 or -2, and you have the time to spare, maybe you say, "You know what? I'm going to wait a little bit. I'm going to eat once I get hungry." And then, as you're eating, you want to check in periodically. Maybe eat half of your food and then check in. "Where am I on the hunger scale right now? Oh, looks like I'm at a +2. Okay, I'm going to eat a little bit more." "I'm going to check in again," because the goal is to stop at +4.

Now, some people, especially if you are someone who eats quickly, you may find that when you stop at +4, 30 minutes, an hour later, you're like, "Nope, it was too much," because that whole time that it takes for the message to get from your stomach to your brain, you recognized that you've eaten enough. So, I, of course, recommend that you slow down, but I also know that sometimes there're emergencies or you just have a couple minutes between cases and you just need to get the food in your body. And if that's the case, that's okay. But, I also want you to think, "Well, you know what? If I have to eat this quickly, then I'm going to stop at a +2, knowing that probably I'm going to get to a +4 once everything settles down." And you can experiment with this. Maybe you need to go to a +3 and then you'll get to +4. You figure that out for yourself with experimentation, but just know that that is the way to work on that.

Now, some people will say, "Well, what if I am totally fat adapted and I'm just really not that hungry," or "What if it's time for lunch? This is my break between clinic and I'm not really hungry right now but I'm not going to be able to eat later," or "I've got a big case coming up and I really need to, if I'm going to eat, it's got to be now?" What you do then is you don't have to be a -4 to eat. If you've decided like, "Yes, I'm going to eat lunch today," and you're like, "I'm really just -1," or just even a zero and you not be hungry at all but you do want to eat, then that's totally fine. You just note that you started at zero and you still stop at -4. And you also make sure that you recognize that if you're starting from zero, you probably will need less food.

If you are not that hungry, then you might eat just part of the food that you had planned, check in with yourself. When you're first learning this and first experimenting, I suggest that you let yourself have the freedom to eat the rest of your food later if you are genuinely -4 on the hunger scale. Because, again, all that scarcity comes up like, "Oh my gosh, what if I get hungry later and I'm not going to be able to make it?" We don't need to be afraid of that because guess what? You're an adult and you get to eat whenever you want to, so you can have a plan for yourself.

"You know, I'm just going to see, I'm going to take good care of myself right now. I'm going to stop when it's enough. And if I'm hungry later, then I can eat." Of course, you can eat. You don't need to be freaking out that you won't be able to get anything for a really long time. You don't need to stuff yourself now for fear that you might get hungry later. This is all a part of what we do to learn to trust our bodies, trust ourselves, and build that relationship with ourselves so that we know that we've got ourselves covered. "I've got myself, I will take care of my needs. I don't need to be in such scarcity or fear that that won't happen." If you have a lot of that, that's something that we work on in coaching as well. It's for sure a lot that I had to work through personally as well from childhood. Just thoughts about scarcity around food.

That is the hunger scale. The hunger scale is a great tool. Like I said, it literally is with you all the time and you can use it all of the time. I suggest even just periodically. If I had to put a number to how I'm feeling right now, what would it be? What I'd say right now is I'm a minus one. It's noon as I'm recording this, and so, yeah, it's probably getting to be lunchtime pretty soon, but am I going to go eat something right now? I'm not. I'm actually not hungry enough to actually go and walk downstairs and get myself something to eat. But in a little while, I think I will be. And so, with time, with practice, with experimentation, you start to really learn how that feels for you.

I have had many people just be like, "I'm just very confused about the hunger scale. I just don't know what it feels like." If that's coming up for you, I just really want to encourage you to recognize that your brain is just indulging in confusion. The way that you find out is you try it, and you get out there and you test it and you see. "What does it feel like for me?" If it just feels super arbitrary, then just arbitrarily choose it. "When I feel this way, I'm going to call it that number." Great, that's totally fine. And then, you can see, "Okay, when I do that, what happens? How do I feel? How does my body respond?" And then, at least you're starting from someplace and you can adjust and readapt as you need to.

The hunger scale is amazing. I highly suggest that you use it and start to really figure out when you're hungry, and then you can also practice not eating when you're not hungry especially when it comes to being around people and just seeing what the experience would be like. Like I told you, I was all hung up. I remember the first time I actually was at a restaurant and everyone was eating and I didn't eat, and I thought, "How is this going to be like," thinking the waitress is going to be all upset that I'm not ordering anything. She did not care in the slightest. Literally, it was the easiest thing. It just goes to show that we put so much pressure on ourselves about all of these things that don't even factor in. Literally, nobody cares. It was just not a big deal at all.

I want to encourage you this week to dig into the hunger scale. If you've already been using it, check in with yourself. "Is this fully calibrated? Are there any adjustments I need to make? Am I really attention to it? Am I convincing of myself when I'm at a +4 that I'm really at a +3 so I can eat a little more?" Are you kind of trying to work the system a little bit, or you just listening honestly and openly to the messages that your body are sending? So good. Love it. Okay.

All right. Try out the hunger scale. So excited for you to try it. And I will check in with you next week with another great episode.

Have a good one. Take care.