



# WEIGHT LOSS FOR BUSY PHYSICIANS

— with Katrina Ubell, MD —

Katrina Ubell: Welcome to the podcast, my friend. I'm so glad that you're here today. I have got a great episode for you. I am so excited to bring you another episode in the Back to Basics series. Okay. Today we're talking about urges and cravings, and this is something that comes up honestly, obviously for so many people all the time where they really are feeling like they're just kind of at the mercy of the urges and cravings. It feels like that happens to them, it's out of their control. They're just kind of hoping that they don't get an urge or a craving, bracing for the next time one happens. It's like the weather or something, like you have no control, you're just at the mercy of it and the best you can do is just weather whatever storm happens to come. Or, maybe occasionally, it's a beautiful sunny day and you don't have those urge and cravings, you get to enjoy it. But then what do you do when those storms come again, as they always do?

So I first was actually, as I was preparing for this, thinking, what is the difference between an urge and a craving? So I went where we go, to Google, and looked it up. So the definition of an urge that I found is a strong desire or impulse. And the definition of craving is a powerful desire for something. So they're basically the same thing. So I thought that was actually good to know. It's like, okay, we're basically talking about the same thing when we have those things. Now, many, many people out in the world teach that cravings are your body communicating with you. It's letting you know what its needs are. I've heard this so many times. I don't hear that so much with the word urge. But with cravings, many people, especially in the intuitive eating world, will talk about your cravings being super important, something that you really need to listen to because your body is trying to tell you what it needs.

Now, that may be the case in some circumstances. I think that it's actually rarely the case though. So let's talk about those differences. Do we just want to ignore those cravings and those urges all the time, or do they sometimes have actually something to tell us and to communicate with us? So this is the way I think about it. Sometimes you'll hear someone say, "Well when I'm on my period" or whatever, "If I've just been eating vegetarian for too long or something, sometimes I'll have this intense craving to eat red meat." And then they interpret that as, "I think my body needs some iron." And you know what? I think that might be the case. I think that probably makes sense. They have some red meat eat and their body may just need a little extra boost of iron.

And I think that's completely fine. Now, if you don't like red meat, do you need to force yourself? No, but I would doubt that you would have a craving for red meat if you don't like it. I think sometimes people even have cravings for fresh vegetables or fresh fruit.

I think sometimes our body's just kind of know that they need like some fiber and some roughage and the vitamins and minerals that are in there. And I think that's great to be in touch with that and to honor that and to really listen, like what would feel good in my body today and to honor that. But, where I think it starts getting really confusing and tricky is in thinking that whatever your body is craving, whatever craving comes up for you, should be honored or met. So I've seen things where it's like if you just are really craving chocolate cake, you just must need that.

And my argument to that is that your cells, literally your physical body's cells, never need chocolate cake. Your cells are never like, "You know what would be amazing? Ice cream." They don't need that. They don't even know what that is. They're like, "Oh, okay, this is what happens when you get this huge sugar rush." And it's not great for them, to be quite honest. So I think it's actually really, really important to understand the difference between your body communicating something and you actually having a craving for something. I think it gets kind of confusing because in the definition for urge and craving, desire was in there. The urge definition was a strong desire or impulse. The craving definition was a powerful desire for something. Well, a lot of the desire that we experience around food actually comes from our brain.

That over desire, in particular, it comes from our brain. It comes actually our thinking and it comes from our physiology, just based on what our bodies are used to receiving. But it's not really so much the body necessarily always communicating. So if you feel like I'm getting a message from my body that I need to eat this kind of nutrient, through this type of food, amazing, go for it. I think that is great, I think that the more connected you can become to your body and honor those messages by offering your body foods and nutrients that actually support it, I'm all for it. I don't know that using the word craving for that is maybe the right way to think about it. Right? I think that because craving has this connotation for really wanting foods that aren't particularly nutritious for us, that it starts to get a little bit confusing.

So for me, myself, I actually don't really resonate with the words urge and craving. I'm not someone who's like, "I've got really a craving for," whatever kind of food or I'm really experiencing an urge to eat right now. Somehow, those words just don't land with me. I don't know what it is. And maybe that's the case for you as well. And if it is the case, I just wanted to offer to you how I actually think about it so that you can see if that maybe is helpful for you as well, because I was actually personally confused about this for quite some time. And once I created this different way of thinking about it, it makes perfect sense to me all the time. I'm never confused about it anymore and it makes me so much more able to properly identify what's going on in my body.

So for me, what I have found is that what most people would call an urge is what I call emotional hunger. And that's because I experience it as a feeling of hunger. It's not the same as the feeling of physical hunger, like my body truly needing food, but it does feel like a hunger. And so I would get confused going, "Well, no, I'm hungry. It's not an urge, I'm hungry." And so that's just how I experience it. Now you don't have to experience the feeling of hunger to be having an urge, right? Because remember, it's a strong desire or impulse. It's a powerful desire for something. So you don't have to experience it as hunger. But if you do, you may also, like me, be confused about that.

So for me, that desire, that excess desire, really often manifests as feeling similar to hunger. Now, what I have found is doing that work of distinguishing the difference between physical hunger and emotional hunger, it was incredibly powerful for me. Physical hunger has a very distinct location in my body. It's much more over my stomach and over the base of the esophagus. It will grumble if I let it go long enough. There's an emptiness there. It's a real specific feeling.

Emotional hunger is slightly different. Now, for some people, it's actually quite a bit different. When they are really getting in touch with what emotional hunger feels like, they realize, it's actually up in my throat or it's up in my face. But a lot of people experience it in their chest and I do as well. So I will feel it around my esophagus. So you can see how it can get confusing if you're not really clear because it's adjacent, it's like physical hunger adjacent. It's like very close to where I feel physical hunger, but it's not exactly the same if I get in touch and really dig in, like, what am I actually feeling?

Physical hunger often comes on much more slowly, especially when you're no longer a sugar burner, when you're more fat adapted. If you want to know what I'm talking about, come join me tonight on that Get Off The Weight Loss Hamster Wheel training, because I'm going to teach you all about this. For me, emotional hunger comes on really, really quickly. It feels like it's sort of clobbering in me. It feels like, "Oh my gosh, I'm so hungry," where physical hunger comes on gradually. It is something that just kind of creeps up and you start noticing you're getting a little hungry and it's not a big deal and okay, I'm getting a little hungrier. Yeah, I think I'd like to eat pretty soon.

Where emotional hunger feels like you got to eat right now. You need to go into that pantry, go find something, start going through the drawers, where is something to eat. And it is different. Now, to have a craving or urge, you don't have to have hunger involved though. Right? So you be like, "No, it's more like a yearning. It's more like I feel like a magnetic pull to that food. It has nothing to do with hunger. I'm not even thinking about hunger. Hunger does not factor." It's like, "I'm not hungry right now. Why aren't you having the chocolate? Well, I'm not hungry. What does hunger have to do with it?" That's literally someone said that to me once and I was like, Hmm, interesting.

What does hunger have to do with eating? Hmm. We should consider that. Right? What does it have to do with eating? So you may find no, urge is totally the word that completely defines it for you. For me, it's emotional hunger. So really, what it comes down to though is that this is all over desire, meaning more desire than is appropriate for how much food our bodies need. Okay? Because an appropriate amount of desire allows you to have whatever it is, meet your body's need it's nutritionally, and then you're done until the next time your body needs more food. Over desire is when it feels very, very strong or it's intrusive, or I always like to think of it as when you feel like the brownies are talking to you from the kitchen and you're upstairs or there's some sort of treat, donuts in the break room. And between every patient, you're thinking about, "Did someone take another one of those Boston creams? Because I really like those." That's over desire, thinking about it too much.

I do want to remind you that episode 252 is a great back to basics episode on over desire. So if you want to take a deeper dive into over desire, definitely listen to that episode after you listen to this one. But this episode's a little bit different here. So to solve for over desire, what do we have to do? We have to reduce our excessive desire to an appropriate amount of desire. Now, that is really what I teach you in episode 252. I'll touch on that briefly here in a moment. But what do you do while you're working to reduce your excessive desire and you're still these urges and cravings? What do you do with those things? Because it's great if you just really don't experience the urges or cravings very often anymore.

But if you're still in the process of reducing that, what do you do in between? So you've got this urge. So like, "Great Katrina. Yes, I understand I need to reduce the desire. But what do I do right now?" And what we have to do there is we have to learn how to feel or allow that excessive desire. Now for me, when I think about allowing an urge, I don't know why, it just feels very challenging to me. The idea of doing that sounds very, very hard. Like I told you, I just do not identify with that word. But a lot of people do. So for me it feels very, very challenging. But if I think of it as just over desire, more desire, like my brain's just confused right now, it feels so much more manageable.

You can think about it however works for you. But I just think it's important to recognize that language matters and it may sound like it's just semantics and what difference does it make? But it can make a really big difference. If there's a certain word or way of thinking about it that really resonates for you, then that is the way that you should be thinking about it. For sure. Super good. So what does it mean to feel or allow the desire? It means that you recognize that you are wanting something, that you are experiencing desire and then you are watching it or observing it. You are not immediately meeting it. You're not feeling that desire and then thinking like, "Oh, this is uncomfortable, I need to get rid of it," and the way to get rid of it is by giving it whatever it wants. It's instead going, "Oh, interesting that I'm really wanting that thing so much."

So this is something that comes up a lot with those who have the urge to binge. I think of overeating as a spectrum, bingeing being on one end of the spectrum. And so if you eat more food than your body needs, I think you're on that spectrum at least a little bit. So it really applies to anybody on that spectrum. It's recognizing I have this desire. It may be minimally powerful or strong. It may be extremely strong as in the case for people who binge often. But what we want to recognize is I have this desire to eat that food or drink that drink, so interesting that I'm having that. I want to be curious about it. When you can step out of being the one experiencing it and move into that watcher or observer role, which we can do because we have a prefrontal cortex where there's that primitive brain desire, urge, craving, and then we step out from that and watch it happening, we're able to disengage from it at least a little bit.

I think it's so good to go, "Interesting that I have this strong desire. I wonder what's going on for me. I wonder what that's all about." And try to identify what it is. Interesting that I'm feeling this strong desire eat and offer so much love and compassion for myself. I must be going through something that makes me feel unsafe or difficult or maybe there's some sort of fear deep down somewhere. And the solution that my brain is coming up with to try to help me to feel better is to eat something or to drink something. It's kind of like if your young child was like, "I'm so sad, I need to eat something." You'd be like, "No, food doesn't go with that. That doesn't make sense."

That's basically that part of us. The same thing's going on for us. We want to be offering ourselves that same love and support and curiosity. There's nothing wrong with you if you have a desire to eat. Doesn't mean that you're weak or undisciplined or something's wrong with your brain. It just means that a connection has been made between eating, or possibly drinking, and solving for painful emotions or avoiding something that you are afraid of or upset about. Basically, essentially avoiding having to experience a difficult time, difficult emotions. When you start to understand that, you can even approach it maybe as I wonder how long this will last if I just sit here with it? I remember the first time I did this. If you've listened on this podcast for a while, you know that even after I'd lost weight, I had this period of time where I really had a difficult relationship with peanut butter, where it was just really very emotional hunger driven, eating a lot of peanut butter at times.

And I remember the first time I thought, "Oh my gosh, this is emotional hunger. I don't actually need more food. I wonder how long this will last if I just sit with it." And I couldn't believe how short it was, like less than five minutes. And for so many people, this is the same experience. But because we don't know how to approach ourselves when we feel this way, we are completely confused, completely going with our old patterns and we just do the thing, eat the thing, drink the thing to just make it go away as quickly as possible. So if you can find that curiosity and take that watcher or observer approach, you can understand so much more about yourself. Now, what I have found with a lot of clients is that they're like, "So I can't ever have the thing, whatever the urge is for or whatever the craving's for, I can't have it."

And telling themselves that actually makes the desire so much worse. Right? First of all, it's a lie. You can eat whatever you want. You're an adult, you get to do whatever you want. Okay? So don't tell yourself you can't have something when you can. The truth is you can, you always can. What I often offer to my clients is maybe what you can do is just notice what's going on and tell yourself, in a few minutes, five minutes, 10 minutes, if I'm still really wanting that food, I totally can have it. But first I just want to experience what's going on for me first. I want to get a little more curious, want to understand this better. If food still feels like the solution at the end of this, I can have it. And so often, because we are no longer resisting that desire, we're saying, "Yeah, I can have it, but first let me do this other thing," the desire actually goes away so much faster.

When we tell ourselves we can't have it, that creates feelings of deprivation. The urges gets stronger. So when you talk about like, "I can't have that," or "I'm not allowed to have that," literally, don't ever, ever think those thoughts or say those things about yourself or to yourself ever again. They're not helpful and they're just not true. You're always making a choice. So you can say, "You know what? Right now I'm choosing to just connect with my body a little bit first, because I'm trying to understand these urges and cravings that I have more before I move into eating the food or drinking the drink. And later, if it's something that I still feel a strong desire for, I can have it if that really seems like the right thing." And maybe you will need to have that. Maybe the best you can do is give yourself a space of a minute and then you eat that, whatever the thing was.

Or maybe you can go a little longer or maybe you realize, if I really do connect with myself, I can't believe it, that desire really goes away. I don't even want it anymore. It's so empowering. It feels amazing to recognize that. And this is how you start taking the wind out of the sails of that importance of food, right? How do we have peace and freedom around food? We no longer think that food is so overly important. It really isn't.

It's important enough to keep you alive. And then after that, it's just there. It's just sitting there. It doesn't have to be so important. Of course, you can get some pleasure out of it, but you check in with your body, like, am I really desiring this right now, in an appropriate way for pleasure? If not, you don't just eat it just to eat it because it's there, right?

So this is what you can be practicing while you're working on getting your brain to cool off, as I like to say. When you're eating sugar and flour based foods regularly, the over desire, this is just like a physiological process, it kind of hijacks the way human bodies are meant to be functioning physiologically and will make it your desire, your over desire and your urges and cravings so much stronger. So taking a break from eating those on a regular basis does wonders at reducing your urges and cravings. And then, if you decide to add those foods back, you can do it in a thoughtful manner. And of course, work on any over desire that comes from that. Then, at the same time, you also want to be discovering what thoughts and beliefs drive you to have this over desire.

Because it's not just the physiological part of it, it's what we think about it. Just like I was saying, thinking I can't have that or that tastes so good, but I shouldn't have it. All that does is create resistance and make you want it even more. So you can have whatever you want. You need to be real intentional and deliberate about how you think about food. Sure, it tastes good, but I could have it now or I could have it later, doesn't really matter, or whatever helps you. What I am often reminding myself, if I'm feeling like I'm getting into that over desire range is I can have this anytime I want to. There's infinite numbers of delicious things in the world, don't have to have this thing right now. I don't need to sacrifice the comfort, the physical comfort of my body, to taste this thing because sometimes, we eat and then we actually feel physically worse. In fact, a lot of times that happens.

And once you get used to feeling really good in your body, it's really a bummer when you don't feel good anymore, whether that's because you just ate food that your body doesn't agree with or you ate too much food. That's something, I overate four years and years. And once I finally recalibrated that, it's very uncomfortable for me to overeat. I really, really do not like that feeling anymore. So those are all the things I talk about in the back to basics episode on over desire, episode 252. But in the meantime, we're working on those urges and cravings. You want to become that watcher or observer. Learn to become curious about what it is that you're feeling. When we talk about allowing it, that means just knowing I can be here with this. Let me get to know it better. How do I even know I'm feeling an urge or a craving? Where is it in my body? What does it actually feel like? Can I relax my muscles and be with it for a little while?

Maybe the whole time, maybe it'll come quickly and go just as quickly. Maybe it'll be there longer. Let's find out. We don't know. That's how we deal with urges and cravings. When you're no longer afraid of them, when you no longer look at them as this experience that you have to go to battle against, it really is not something that you're scared about. You're not worried, like what if I get these urges, what am I going to do? You just know how to handle it. You know how to work with yourself rather than against yourself.

Take care. Bye-bye.