



WEIGHT LOSS FOR BUSY PHYSICIANS

— with Katrina Ubell, MD —

Katrina Ubell: Well, hello there, my friend. How are you today? So glad to be here, recording this episode. I've been trying for days to record this episode for you. I was traveling and I actually brought my podcast mic with me thinking I could record at my friend's house. And what I found is that some people just have a loud house, just in general. Everything is very, very loud to the point where I was legitimately concerned that it was not going to work. So I thought, okay, well, when I get to the hotel. I stayed with my friend for three nights and I was going to a hotel for a couple nights. I thought, oh, I'll just do it in the hotel. I've done that before.

I get to this beautiful hotel and they are taking advantage of the winter to do some work on the exterior of the building. It actually faces an internal courtyard, but on the inside part of that courtyard, they were doing some sort of work on the facade of the building. And so there's scaffolding everywhere and a lot of banging and clanging and things like that, and I was like, well, this isn't going to work either. And I thought, well, theoretically, I could get up really early and do it before the workers start. And I just decided not to. So here I am, in my lovely attic office with my usual setup, ready to go. So, so good. So glad that you're here today.

Alrighty. We are going to be talking about exceptions today and you know what? I used to call exceptions something else. I used to call them joy eats. And I'm going to explain to you why I changed the name, but before I do that, I am going to just read little something from a lovely listener named Paula Naples who reached out and had a question about joy eats. And it really kind of delighted me, what she wrote. So I'm going to read to you what she wrote.

She said, "My question is about joy eats. I am in love with this term. I am not cheating on myself. I'm not out of control. I used to have a "don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" phenomenon. FYI, it was not making charitable contributions. It was rapidly shoveling stale cookies, potato chip crumbs, and anything else available into my mouth in a slippery slope/broke the seal/I'll start again Monday/guilt after way. How often can I plan joy eats? I've been trying to be specific. A piece of cake, peanut butter cup ice cream, instead of no holds bar eating fast for a day or evening. I find I am much more specific about what I want even planning to make it myself. So let's hear more about joy eats, planning amounts stories."

All right, Paula, this is for you and everybody else who is interested. This is a topic that I actually on purpose have not spent a lot of time on in this podcast because whenever we are spending a lot of time thinking about like, but when do I get to have all those other things? How am I going to have all those other things?

Then I know that you have over-desire and we need to work on that first. We want to get to a place where you are happy to have an exception when you plan for it. And also happy not to have one. And that is true peace and freedom around food, where you're like, yeah, I'm sure that would taste amazing. Am I going to have it? Maybe, maybe you not. Let me decide or have I decided in advance. But let's just back it up.

So what are exceptions? An exception is eating food that is off your plan. So whatever your plan is, this food is not included. So you're eating food that's off plan, but on purpose. So you have thought about it ahead of time and you have planned to eat this food in a rational way so there's no guilt, there's no shame. It's all about pleasure. So much of our overeating is in response to some sort of negative emotion, trying to avoid experiencing something, trying to distract ourselves from something that we're experiencing. So we're barely even tasting the food, we're just like looking for a means to an end. I just want to feel better. But what we want to be when we're doing an exception is actually tasting the food and enjoying it.

And so why do we do exceptions or joy eats and why do we not call them cheat days or a cheat meal or a cheat food? That is a very common way that most of the weight loss industry discusses eating food that's off plan. And this simple reason is because we don't cheat on ourselves. Like you are an adult who gets to decide to do whatever you want to do. You get to eat whatever you want to eat and you're not cheating anything. Like it has such a negative connotation, actually makes me kind of irritated when people use that term, like we're cheating. Like that's like you're doing something wrong. And chewing up food and swallowing it, there's no moral value to that. You're not doing anything wrong if you're eating food. Okay.

So we don't cheat on ourselves. We don't have the kind of relationship with ourselves. Like cheating means, like I said I was going to do this one thing and instead I'm doing this other thing. And usually when we cheat, we try to really hide it. And that's often what we do. We're like trying to help ourselves forget. Like, we're like, I don't want to keep a food journal because then I have to actually see the food I ate. Because it's just so easy for me to try to hide it for myself, try to forget that it even happened.

So definitely we don't call it cheat. And I moved away from the term joy eat because some people actually really didn't like that term. They found it kind of confusing. A lot of people were like, look, I'm trying not to get excessive joy from food. I'm really trying to just enjoy naturally good tasting food and not have it be this huge source of joy. And so they didn't really connect with that term. And so I think the term, exceptions, is just more neutral. It's like you have your plan. That's what you do most of the time. And then on occasion, you make an exception and you eat something different. It's just totally, much more of a neutral way of looking at it. So you can call it whatever you like. But I like calling them exceptions. I think it's the most accessible for most people.

So when you are trying to lose weight, why might you want to have an exception? This actually comes up. Some people are like, duh, of course I want an exception, but definitely some people are like, well look, if I'm trying not to eat these foods that light my brain up excessively and create all this over-desire for me. Like, do I have to do this? Do I want to have an exception? Like, what if I just never ate that food again? And so it is reasonable to ask like, why might you want to consider having it? And I think that really ultimately what we want to do is we want to learn how to get some pleasure out of food in appropriate amounts.

So like Paula was saying like not like I'm going eat this thing. And then it turns into the slippery slope, broke the seal, I start again on Monday and guilt after. Like this whole big emotional cycle.

Instead, we want to just be able to taste the food, enjoy it for what it is, let ourselves have that pleasure and then let that be enough and then move right back on. Because what leads to the broke the seal, I'll start again Monday is all that scarcity. All that, I'm not going to be able to have it. This is my chance. I need to have as much as I can have. So when you're doing exceptions, you're teaching yourself. No, you can have whatever you want. You plan for it. You eat it when your body's asking for food, meaning like when you're hungry or you still have more room. You're not satisfied to the point of a plus four on the hunger scale. And you only eat it while it tastes good.

So I remember going, it's so funny. When you are thinking you can't have anything, which is a lie, remember, because you're an adult, you get to eat whatever you want. But when you tell yourself you can't have something, then you want all the things. Like every single thing out there, you're like, oh my God, I'd give anything to eat that thing. And I remember one time just deciding, okay, I'm going to do this joy eat. Because I was calling it joy eats back then. I'm going to go find something delicious. And I'm like walking around the grocery store in the bakery section. And I'm like, really looks that great. But it's so funny. But I did get, I think it was some sort of like chocolate ... It wasn't a cupcake because I'm not a big cupcake person, but something to that effect, some sort of chocolate cake type of thing that looked very rich and decadent.

And so my deal with myself was I was going to eat as much as I wanted, but I needed to eat it slowly. Like not plowing through it and taste it, like really enjoy each bite. And I was also open to the fact that when it no longer tasted as good as it had then I would stop eating. And so it was, I want to say this was several years ago, but I want to say it was about five bites in because I was counting the bites. I was just really, really curious, like am I just going to eat the whole thing? Like what's going to happen? And I did this also, I should say when I was home by myself, which I think at first can actually be a great way to do it, just being by yourself somewhere so that you can really be dialed in and focused. Of course, we want to get to the point where you can do this around other people and things like that. But at first to not be distracted, it can be great to be by yourself.

So I had a bite, tasted it, tasted really good, kept going. And I had the fifth bite and I was like, oh, still really good. And then I had this sixth bite and because I was paying attention, it was immediately and obviously clear that that bite did not taste as good as the five prior bites had tasted. And I was like, okay, well this is my agreement with myself. I said I would stop. So I'm going to stop. And I did. And I actually threw the rest out, because that was another thing I was working on was being okay with throwing away food. And it was a truly a new experience for me to really just be able to not be done because the food was gone. But because it legitimately was not tasting good anymore and it really didn't have so much to do with fullness. It just was the taste. The pleasure had peaked. I'd had as much as I wanted.

Now, have you ever, because I for sure have, noticed that it wasn't tasting as good and still kept on eating because you were kind of like hoping more pleasure would come? Like it's so funny in hindsight thinking back to all the times I did that. Thinking like, yeah, it's not tasting so good anymore, but there's more, I might as well just eat it.

And what we're doing here is we're training ourselves to, on occasion, really enjoy those foods and stop when the pleasure has peaked. Okay. So this is a skill. It's something you have to actually practice. And that's one reason why you might want to have exceptions.

Now, why might you not want to have an exception, at least right now? Now, if you are in the initial stages of recalibrating your taste buds, recalibrating your brain chemistry, getting your body to be more fat adapted and function really truly the way a human body has always been designed to function. Meaning you're taking a break from eating sugar and flour on a regular basis. Then I suggest that you wait at least six weeks before having an exception. Even if it's your birthday, even if it's your kid's birthday, even if it's your mom's birthday, even if it's your anniversary or you're going to a wedding or whatever, this is something that always, always comes up. And I think if you are in that stage, it's such a great opportunity for you to not eat the food that's off plan and practice learning how to enjoy other parts of the experience because for sure the best part of a birthday is not eating the cake. For sure, the best part of a wedding is not eating the cake.

We only think it is because that's what our brain has been trained to focus on. So what you're then doing is saying, okay, well I'm not going to have that. So let me figure out what else is great about this. Like maybe it's actually interacting with the other humans. Maybe it's dancing at the wedding. Maybe it's ... Whatever it is, some decorating for the party for the birthday or something like that, like actually challenging yourself to find other also meaningful and really fun and great experiences that are a part of the event and of itself. So you might not want to have an exception when you're doing that.

Also, if you are trying to lose the last couple of pounds and it's been going really slowly, you might want to stretch out your exceptions. You may not want to do one every week. You may want to kind of drag it out a little bit more or only have an exception if it's really something that you can't have all the time. I think this is a great opportunity when this is going on to really work on reducing your desire. Some people get to a point where they're just like, well, I just haven't really had any exceptions because I just don't really want any of those things. And that's how you know, that your desire has gotten to an appropriate level. You can take it or leave it. It just really doesn't matter to you that much. So that can be a reason.

Another reason is sometimes people will find, and this doesn't happen super commonly, but it does happen from time to time. I'll have clients who try the exceptions and they just find after lots of trial and error and really working at it that having an exception just isn't worth it to them. Like they would really just prefer to not eat flour, sugar based foods. Typically, it's going to be sugar based. So sometimes they'll decide to have flour based exceptions like pizza or pasta or things like that because maybe that doesn't give them the over-desire so much. But I definitely have had clients who are like, literally I have that one exception. I do everything I can to support myself and be all ready to go. And then it's just like the over-desire, the brain chatter, the urges and cravings are so strong for so many days afterward that they're just like, I just don't even want to do this to myself. Like, do I really have to do this? Of course the answer is no. Of course, you don't have to if you make that decision.

There are definitely some 12 step programs for overeating that talk about never eating flour or sugar ever again. And I think for some people who really identify with the addiction model, I think that that can be a great solution for them. But I find that most people, at least those who are attracted to my work and what I do and my philosophy are like, you know what? Like, I don't really see myself never having it ever again. I want to figure out a way to be more at peace with it where it's like it's around, but it's such a big deal. I don't find myself feeling so out of control around it. And that's exactly what exceptions can help you with.

So now let's talk about the difference between an exception and an exception meal or day. So an exception itself is one food. Okay. So it's not like going to the buffet and having a whole bunch of the little treats. It's like one flavor of ice cream or one slice of cake or one type of pizza or something like that. Okay. Or like if you like chips or something like that, like one type of chip. And an exception meal is just like it sounds like, where the whole meal is going to be an exception. An exception day is where the whole day, you're going to eat whatever you want.

Now, what I'll tell you is that when you have an exception, just the one food and you have that about once a week, while you're losing weight, you should, for most people be able to still lose weight while you're doing that. If you decide to have an exception meal or an exception day, many people will find that they actually don't lose weight that week. So not a guarantee, but it's just something that you have to recognize that you're signing up for. Like if you decide to do an exception day and then you're disappointed because the scale doesn't go down, it's like, well, we knew that was going to happen. That's not really a surprise. So that's really what it comes down to.

Some people find for any number of reasons that they decide to do an exception meal or an exception day. But we want to just be real clear about that in our program, The Weight Loss for Doctors Only we have lots of tools to help you figure out like, okay, why am I doing this? Do I really want to do this? And if I do, how am I going to support myself? How am I going to make sure that I get right back on track again after and things like that? Because that's really, really important. We want to really help ourselves to be able to get right back to business as usual when it's over.

Okay. So I do actually encourage my clients to do exceptions though. I've had some people who are definitely like afraid to do them. Like they're like things are going so well and I'm losing weight and I'm feeling so good. And I'm just terrified that I'm going to have an exception that's going to screw everything up. And so what I always say to them is, well, you don't have to do it right now because my programs are six months long. So we have time.

But before you're finished, at least with this six months or if you plan on continuing on maybe a little longer, but what I want you to do is to have actually had some exceptions so you can see what comes up for you. Where do you struggle? You can get some coaching help on that. You can figure out how to support yourself because it is another skill that's going to be important. Maybe right now, you don't really want to have that. But you're not going to have that terror, that fear for the rest of your life. Like I'm assuming at some point you're going to want that. And if that's the case, then we've got to figure out a way to do this in a way that really serves you. So we have to learn that skill. How can we interact with these foods in a way that serves us?

So the other reason why I think exceptions are so important is because what we find when we really do them and really taste the food is we find out that a whole lot of stuff that we thought was so good does not actually taste that good. When you actually like mindfully and on purpose, eat them and taste them, you realize like this is actually not even that good. And I know this has happened for so many people for so many things. I've had people do an exception with a diet Coke and they're like, this is disgusting. And I can't believe I've been literally drinking like gallons of this a week for the last 20 years. And it's not because we're like trying to convince ourselves of anything. It's more just like, oh interesting. I don't actually even like this. When I'm not using this as a way to feel better as a way to not experience my emotions, it turns out that this doesn't even taste that good to me.

So like Paula said, a peanut butter cup ice cream. Like there are certain ice creams maybe that like these couple flavors are your favorites and you're just not going to have the ones that you don't like. One of my biggest mantras is like for myself is like I don't eat food that doesn't taste good to me. So if it's like some crummy, vanilla ice cream, that's like the French vanilla. Gross. And my rule with vanilla ice cream is it has to have the vanilla bean flecks in it. If it doesn't have little dark flecks in it, like I'm not even going to have it. Because I know it won't taste as good as I want it to taste. And it's not because I'm like, oh, I don't want to waste the calorie. I'm just like no, I respect myself too much to eat food that doesn't taste good. It's just the end of it. So you're going to be able to find that so many foods that you used to think were so important or so delicious, often, they're just really not as good as you thought they were.

And that can be really freeing because now you don't even need to think about that. Like totally fine. And if there's still a bunch that you think tastes super delicious, awesome. But what we want to do is make sure that we're working on those thoughts of desire for those as well. Like or over-desire.

Okay. So exceptions really are an important skill to master when you're losing weight permanently, like I said, because you are unlikely to consistent with never eating off planned food for the rest of your life. And I know like people will get into a really good groove and they're like, I'm never going to change, but like I'm telling you, how many times did I say with Weight Watchers, like I'm going to get rid of my big clothes, I won't need them again, only to need to buy more? Okay. So I'm just saying, you're going to probably want to eat those foods. Some event will happen, something will happen and you will very likely want to experience this. You can do the same thing with any alcoholic drinks as well. Okay. Where you can do exception drinks. That's completely fine as well.

Okay. So Paula asks how to plan these. Well, my recommendation is like I said, wait at least six weeks after stop eating flour and sugar. And then you can plan one in a week. I like to have you eat it over the course of a short period of time, like an hour. So it's not like, well, I'm basically nibbling on this thing all day long, this one food. It's one food eaten over about an hour and ideally you should be planning it at least the day before.

So here's an important point. Then when the time comes to have it, if you don't want it, you don't have to have it. So typically I'm all about like you plan for it and then that's what you have. But if you definitely just do not have the desire for it, then don't eat it. You absolutely don't have to eat it. You can plan for it at another time.

What a lot of people find is that when they've planned for it in advance, their desire is actually much lower because what fuels their over-desire is the decision making in the moment. That primitive brain going, yes, let's have it right now. So when you're using your prefrontal cortex to decide in advance, you're like yeah, I could have it. Okay. Like it's just not as big of a deal. This is important. Okay. But it's also important to let ourselves eat food that tastes good. That's maybe not particularly nutritious for us, but we still also like it. I think it's a very rational, reasonable way to live your life. Most of the time you don't have this stuff and sometimes you do and you do it in a thoughtful and controlled fashion.

Now, once you're at maintenance, you may find that you can have more and still maintain your weight. So that's going to be something that you have to decide on your own. Some people find that they have a couple of exceptions on the weekend and the rest of the week they're on plan and they maintain just fine. Typically, you're not going to be losing weight if you're doing it that way, but everybody's different. So you just have to kind of experiment and see.

The amounts. Well, the way that you know to stop is when the bite you take tastes not as good, even slightly not as good as the bite before it. Okay. That's how you know when you're done. So it's not so much about fullness or hunger scale. It's much more about, am I getting all the pleasure out of this? I like to think of it as like, when you wring out a washcloth, like you're ringing out every drop of pleasure possible. And as soon as that starts to go down, you know you've gotten it. So you're like, yeah, okay. I've gotten all the pleasure. I'm good to go. And what's so good is that you still feel physically good after. You don't get that, like heaviness, that like, oh, I feel sick. Like it was too much. You don't feel guilty after because you planned for it. It was all on plan, so much easier to manage your mind. So good.

So that is how I recommend doing exceptions. And it really is something that's personal and individual, but like in terms of how you do it and that kind of thing. But it's something that really can make losing weight really nice, sustainable kind of a thing. I remember someone telling me, they felt like it was a bit of a pressure release valve and I think that can be a good way to approach it, especially initially. Then eventually we want to look at like, well, what's even building the pressure up? And of course it's over-desire. It's like using will power and not actually processing or reducing that desire. But in the beginning, especially can make it feel like, okay, this is sustainable, I can keep going and stick with it for the long haul. Anything that is so stringent the whole time. I mean, the odds of us continuing on with it for most people is going to be extremely low. And we're talking about permanent weight loss here so we've got to figure out a way to make it so that we can do it long term.

So that's what I have for you on exceptions. I hope Paula that this was helpful for you. And of course everyone listening, I know this will give you some good guidance on how to approach this.

Have a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful rest of your week. I'm sending you lots and lots of love, and I'll talk to you very soon. Take care.