

Infertility & Emotional Eating

By Howard Farkas, Ph.D.

Introduction by Laurence A. Jacobs, M.D.

This is the fourth article in our series on Fitness & Fertility.

The 1st article, “Fitness Misconceptions” George Morrison/ Laurence Jacobs M.D., Fertility Today (Winter 2007), focused on a fitness program we designed for my overweight and/or PCOS patients to help burn more calories. Fertility Fact: Any type of regular dedicated fitness program (half hour/day) can help with insulin resistance and promote better weight loss and enhance fertility.

The 2nd article, “Weight Loss & Conditioning Improve Fertility” Laurence A. Jacobs M.D., Fertility Today (Spring 2007), emphasized that the adverse effects of obesity on fertility and pregnancy outcomes are overwhelming and indisputable. Even with fertility drugs or In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) treatments, pregnancy rates are adversely affected by obesity. Regular exercise and/or weight loss of 5-10% of body weight can each independently lead to spontaneous pregnancies as well as dramatically improve pregnancy rates with all fertility treatments.

The 3rd article, “Foods for Conception” Lauren Weiss DC, CCN, highlights the importance of proper nutrition, in addition to weight reduction and exercise, as part of the overall plan to improve pregnancy rates in obese women. <http://www.TheInfertilityDoctor.com> ~ L. J.

In a *Fertility Today* article (Summer 2007) on weight and its effect on conception, Dr. Laurence Jacobs reviewed the overwhelming evidence that for women with obesity and infertility, losing as little as 5% of their initial body weight dramatically improves the likelihood of conception. This news certainly offers hope to women who are in that category, and perhaps more importantly, gives them an opportunity to take a significant degree of control in their efforts to conceive. However, for many women who have experienced the frustration of trying to control their eating, this glimmer of hope may feel more than simply a matter of adding a dose of willpower to their behavioral regimen. It is more often an emotionally charged struggle that involves repeated successes followed by repeated lapses. At best, this leads to the frustrating feeling of running in place as their efforts bring them no closer to their goal. At worst, the lapses become more frequent than the positive efforts, resulting in more weight than they started with. For women who are trying to take some control in their infertility treatment, this can result not only in feelings of failure and futility, but of guilt and self-blame.

There is, however, good reason to be hopeful. Losing weight is not simply about willpower or having good nutritional information. Many people who struggle with their weight use food as a

way of coping with frustration. Strengthening willpower or reading about proper eating does nothing to help deal with the emotional issues that may cause overeating. Understanding what those feelings are about and finding more effective ways to resolve them does.

The key is to recognize that eating is a response to whatever is causing the emotional upset, such as stress. In other words, the stress is the cause and overeating is the effect. As with any cause and effect relationship, you cannot change the effect without first changing the cause. This is why diets don't work for emotional eating – they focus on the *response* to the emotional upset rather than the reason for it.

Think about emotional eating as way of letting go. You may see a candy dish on a co-worker's desk that is always out there, and you've passed it by dozens of times without thinking twice about it. Today, though, you're having a difficult time resisting the temptation. Finally you say "what the heck!" and grab a handful of chocolate. You finally just let go. You're not sure why you did it, because you didn't really want the candy. You just wanted to have the release of letting go.

If letting go is a reaction, then the cause is probably something that feels like the *opposite* of letting go – like holding back. So think about what is going on in your life that might make you feel like you're holding back. Is anger building up toward someone you're close to and you are holding back on expressing it? Do you feel like you're taking care of everyone else's needs while holding back on your own needs? Perhaps you've gotten some recognition at work that you don't feel you deserve but now feel like you have to keep up the impression that people have – does that make you feel like you're holding back on being yourself?

All of these situations can create a build-up of emotions that you may not even be aware of feeling. But on some level you feel the need to "just let go" building up inside of you. That's when the temptation to grab those chocolates becomes very difficult to resist. Because it's not about the food – it's about the need to release the restraint that has gradually been building until it becomes more than you can contain.

For couples who are undergoing treatment for infertility, it's not at all difficult to imagine where the stress of holding back might come from. Everyone is telling you to relax and be patient with the process. You don't want to appear uncooperative or overanxious, and you try to at least appear like you take every new disappointment in stride. In other words, you experience a lot of holding back. Sooner or later, that pressure builds to a point where something has to give, and for many people that means letting go of their control around food.

It would be nice if the cause of the problem, once identified, can somehow just be solved. In most situations, such as infertility, there is no easy solution. It is important to realize, however, that when a response such as overeating is an attempt to cope with stress, it is not happening consciously. It is an automatic reaction. But when you can identify the cause and understand why

you respond in the way that you do, it becomes possible to come up with a better strategy for coping.

Take control of your behavior by understanding what is behind it. If you can't solve the problem that causes it, see if you can come up with a better way of dealing with it. If you need to be self-indulgent, then instead of eating, allow yourself a treat that you're not going to regret the next day. Go to a day spa and get a manicure, a massage or a facial. Or stay home and soak in a warm bath with soft music and something to read. The options are only limited by your imagination.

Learning how to cope more effectively is the first step to lasting behavior change.

Howard Farkas, Ph.D. is a licensed clinical health psychologist and is the founder and director of Chicago Behavioral Health, an interdisciplinary practice specializing in preventive health and behavioral change. Dr. Farkas specializes in helping people with chronic illness cope with their condition, and those at risk to overcome obstacles to making lasting health-related behavior change. He is on the faculty of Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine and is on the medical staff of Northwestern Memorial Hospital where he serves as a consultant to the hospital's Division of Cardiology. Dr. Farkas has lectured and presented widely in the area of behavioral health and adjustment to chronic illness. He has also served as a consultant and executive coach to many Fortune 500 companies. For more information visit www.chicagobehavioralhealth.com. Dr. Farkas can be reached at (312) 846-7155 or by email at drfarkas@chicagobehavioralhealth.com.



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