

Katy Byrne, MFT, psychotherapist in Sonoma, CA, She's the author of *The Courage to Speak Up.*, *Hairball Diaries*. (Getting out the "hairball" is what she learned from her cat—that it's a relief to express what's bothering us!)

## Eating Too Many Hairballs On Recovery from Food Addiction

"I didn't know that eating a meal was an act of kindness ... I didn't know that choosing a kind, available partner was an act of kindness."  
From *When Food Is Love* by Geneen Roth

I remember when I couldn't stop eating. People who have never eaten compulsively really can't understand what it's like to think about food all day, to not be able to stop, to get up at 3:00 AM on a cold winter night, throw on your coat over your pajamas and run to the grocery store for more food, even when you've just eaten three pizzas. It's the worst nightmare. Not every overeater does it this way, but often, rituals take over.

The self-loathing is unthinkable. When I finally passed through this horror show, after five years of intensive work on myself—I literally felt that I'd had an exorcism. Something was removed from my body, my cells, and my soul.

Nowadays I stuff feelings and fears with food more often. I have gained some weight in these last few years of struggle with the loose ends of a relationship and loss. But, I know that the days of food obsession are gone. I never want to eat boxes of cookies or three pizzas at a sitting. I do eat too much popcorn at midnight or nervously devour hamburgers at Murphy's Pub because that's what we do there. ( Even though all I see is the animal screaming as I munch, my ability to eat consciously is slower than I would like – and so, I eat against my own grain-stuff that doesn't even digest well. )

What caused my breakthrough from being a voracious overeater to someone with a normal desire for food? It was that I finally understood the little girl crying inside me, like a baby who had not received enough milk. That little kid was a good, innocent being who was starved, afraid she might die from failing to thrive, from the desperate need to be soothed, loved, held, seen. Too often, this deprived inner child runs our lives, causing addictions of all kinds.

Years of hard work later, after therapy, diets, and exercise—I was still wanting, unfilled, wondering if that next something might do it for me. Addictions tend to replace themselves continually. It's discouraging to overcome one and see another pop up. But, my unfulfilled longings are half what they were before, because I now know how to have conversations with my deeper self. I began writing in my journal, which became a book called *Hairball Diaries: The Courage to Speak Up*. I learned to unstuff my feelings by identifying my needs.

After my recovery from food compulsion, I transferred the addiction to serial men. The terrible disappointment I felt when it didn't work out with them was the same sorrow I had when I shed tears over chocolate cake—I knew as soon as I ate it, it would no longer satisfy me, because there was no love in that cake. Similarly, the relationships I chose were full of fluff, like cream puffs, but without commitment, communication, or sustaining nourishment.

But, I continue to breathe into my fear and loneliness. I find my true self, over and over again: my talents, ways to connect with spirituality, ways to stop scaring myself with fear-based negative thinking, and genuine acceptance of who I am. This powerful process repeatedly lightens my load and saves me from choosing people and activities that don't truly support me.