

The impact of food guilt

Food guilt robs me of the joy of food – eating food, shopping for food, cooking. I used to adore food, and food has always been integral to any shared moments of celebration, so it is a sad loss.

Every day becomes a battle. The arguments in my head for and against eating mean that it is hard to relax around food. It also means that to an outside observer I am pretty inconsistent. Whether I'm able to eat any food, or a forbidden food like chips depends on who is winning the argument in my head.

Food guilt brings a lot of fights and tension, especially about menu planning, food preparation and about going out for dinner. That is another reason to hate food.

Food guilt invites a lot of planning. To go out with friends for dinner requires days of planning – How much should I limit my food in the days leading up to the dinner? What will be on the menu that I'm allowed to eat? How big are the portions? How little can I eat without people noticing? Will I have an opportunity to throw up what I do eat? What if I eat thinking I'll be able to throw up and then someone else is in the next cubicle and I can't? How much time can I spend in the toilet before someone notices?

Food guilt steals my focus away from important things. All this planning and worrying takes a lot of time and energy. It is hard to have mental space left to think about more important things, because thinking about what to eat and when to eat has become so important.

For food guilt to have power it has to convince me of some terrible things, like I'm weak if I eat that forbidden food, and I'm lacking in determination. Other lies it tries to convince me of include that I'm letting people down by eating, and that I should be working harder to prove myself as a valuable human being. It also says that I would be a better and stronger person if I were thinner and more 'in control'.

Food guilt brings worry about what other people are thinking of me, especially around food choices. Are they thinking I'm eating too much, or eating something 'bad'? Do they think I'm disgusting? Do they think I look fat?

Food guilt makes a lot of demands, not just about food. It also makes demands about exercise. It also tells me what I can and cannot wear.

Sometimes it offers me other ways of punishing myself if I do decide to eat the wrong thing. Sometimes the guilt comes after eating, but sometimes I can negotiate a suitable punishment in advance, and make an informed choice about whether it is actually worth eating that enticing food.

Food guilt tries to twist other people's encouragements or innocent comments to serve its own purposes. For example "You seem more relaxed around food now" or "It's great that you ate your lunch today" becomes "You ate too much today."

You've given up too easily, and let me down and let yourself down. I hope you will try harder tomorrow". This makes me want to stop eating immediately, as I become swamped by an ocean of regret. It might seem hard to believe that words could be twisted to such a degree, but I'm speaking from experience (on several different occasions).

Undermining my support team: by twisting people's words the food guilt tries to separate me from the very people who are helping me. It taunts me with ideas of what they "really" think. You have to admit that it is fairly cunning!

Things that have helped me

Doing one small act of self care: Letting myself eat one forbidden thing without 'making amends' or letting myself sleep in just once instead of exercising makes it seem possible to do the next thing. (Sometimes the food guilt takes revenge, so this one is a bit risky.)

Noticing society's messages: Talking about society's expectations and messages has helped me to consider whether I want to obey them or not.

Writing down the lies and tricks of the food guilt: I write down what it tells me, then try to figure out why it might want me to believe this. For example, when something goes wrong sometimes the food guilt tells me it is because I ate the wrong thing, or hoped for something better in life, and that I don't deserve good things. This trick is to convince me that I should always follow the rules, and is trying to make me more compliant to its demands. Another example is that by telling me that I am weak or pathetic I will feel bad about myself, which means I will have to try harder to prove myself by becoming thinner and more in control, and therefore play right into the hands of the food guilt. It is pretty sneaky!

Remaining vigilant: It tries to change shape to escape my new knowledges, so I have to remain vigilant. This is another reason to write things down - I can observe its tricks and tactics. This is pretty tiring, but worth the hard work.

Taking small steps/having small expectations: I don't like it when people celebrate my progress too enthusiastically, because it can bring the expectation that things are 'all better' now. This makes me feel backed into a corner. If they really understood the slippery, ferocious and all-consuming nature of this food guilt beast, they might understand that every day is a battle - one good hour doesn't guarantee a good day or week. It seems more realistic to try to *sometimes* ignore or disobey the food guilt, and build up slowly from there.

Noticing what my body is telling me: After obeying the demands of the food guilt for quite a while I started to eat a bit more food. Unfortunately, my stomach then really hurt whenever I ate something reasonable like a sandwich, and the feeling of being full felt disgusting. For about a week the food guilt told me I was being punished for eating too much, which led to a lot of sadness and regret. One day I wondered if the pain could be a message/alarm from my body telling me that under-eating had started to impact it, and that it would take time for my stomach

to stretch again. By listening to my body in this way I was able to eat reasonably and to live with the pain, which did eventually go away.

Hearing or reading about other people's experiences: I read the book 'Biting the Hand that Starves You' by Maisel, Epston and Borden and it helped me to make sense of my experiences and to feel less alone. Just a warning that as the food guilt is so clever at manipulating, it can twist a story into an inspiration to lose more weight and try harder to be 'as good' as those other people. I would suggest reading this book while still going to counselling, so you can have someone outside your own head to be a sounding board, to help you recognise and challenge the sneaky tricks of the food guilt.