

Navigating Sugar's Slippery Slope

April's indulgence with chocolate Easter eggs, marshmallow peeps and macaroons is like the 10th plague of Passover. Consuming sugar over successive days triggers a tsunami of cravings for some individuals and passes over others. Why are some people so vulnerable?

Research has shown that the neurological response to sugar is similar to drugs and other addictive behaviors. For some people the first bite is like flipping a switch. They now see all things sweet.

The following day they are drawn to every opportunity for a sweet treat. By day three they are on the hunt, plotting and planning for the next hit.

THE ROLE OF SUGAR REGULATION

How we metabolize sugar is pivotal. People who are insulin sensitive secrete less insulin in response to sugar or other carbohydrate. They can effortlessly eat one cookie or take a bite of cake and leave the rest.

Others are relatively more insulin resistant, secreting a larger dose of insulin in response to food, especially refined sugars and starches. The most insulin resistant take a bite and crave more. They are "in the sugar".

Any number of factors can interfere with a signal of satiety, that sense of being satisfied after eating. Research hasn't looked closely enough at the link between biochemistry and how we experience the biochemistry. Feeling "hungry" just an hour or two after eating—even a large meal-- is utterly frustrating especially for someone trying to lose weight.

Thin sugar addicts are not home free. They may be "metabolically obese" even if the scale doesn't say so. There is danger using body weight, body size or BMI to justify a sweet tooth.

GETTING OFF SUGAR

Cutting out sugar cold turkey can work. After three days of no sugar, people notice a significant shift in their desire for sweet. Even by the end of day 2, many sense relief. But some don't.

People with extreme insulin resistance, a history of disordered eating, and those struggling with other addictive behaviors are in the wrestling match of a lifetime. It can take months, if not years, for the exaggerated desire for sweet to quiet down.

WHAT CAN HELP

Moderate physical activity helps improve insulin sensitivity. Exercising too hard or too long can actually make it worse.

Diet makes a difference. Enough protein can help someone feel more sated, more grounded. When people eat enough protein, sugar cravings tend to subside.

Complementing the protein with adequate whole foods is the tricky part. Some people only handle the carbohydrate in vegetables or dairy. Some people handle beans and legumes, fruit and whole grains. Most get triggered by excessively refined starches--with and without the sugar. And yet sometimes, a small hit of sugar is the only thing that will quiet the beast.

Stress management skills are critical. Escalating expectations and demands stimulate cortisol secretion. Cortisol drives sugar cravings. Going to sugar in times of stress may be all someone knows.

Most of us have to learn how to self soothe *without* sugar. Some will need to cultivate a completely different skill set.

SURVIVING WITHDRAWAL

Acute sugar withdrawal can be intense and overwhelming. Sometimes it helps to learn how to eat sugar. A favorite strategy is to enjoy a small and especially delicious sweet right after a strong protein meal. Eating less starch at the meal quiets the overall carbohydrate load.

Clients often find significant relief when they avoid having sweet two days in a row. I encourage people to start where they can, and slowly wean.

LIVING WITH ABUNDANCE

Sugar is abundant, accessible, relatively cheap and completely legal. No wonder it easily becomes a favorite or only means to celebrate, indulge, and self soothe.

Yet people struggle when they are “in the sugar.” It’s easy to lose one’s balance sliding down sugar’s slippery slope. The challenge is to celebrate, indulge and self soothe effectively, especially when choosing to eat something sweet.