

WOMEN LEADING CHANGE
FEMpower



STAYING CONNECTED

Week Two - Roni Davis Presentation



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NUTRITION IN TRYING TIMES

The theme we wanted to run with for these events is staying connected ...with YOURSELF.

This week, our nutrition week, is no different. It's nutrition week but I'm not going to be talking a whole lot about actual nutrition, rather, I'll be talking about the why we eat the way we eat, why you shouldn't be trying to "be good with food", why awareness and connection with ourselves and our bodies is the key to changing at all it and I'm going to leave you with some actionables you can start practicing today.

So, if we want to have a conversation about food and protecting our mental and physical health, we need to first acknowledge what happens when we feel mindlessly and uncontrollably driven to the fridge a hundred times a day and can't stop eating things that make us feel like crap for reasons we don't really understand.

In my experience, what happens is that we feel guilty, we feel ashamed, we worry about gaining weight and we feel like we're alone in the way we feel. And none of those things are good for our mental or physical health, on top of that, they often drive us to make more choices that make us feel like crap and add to the stress or whatever else we're already feeling.

So, the first thing I want to say is that however you've been managing food lately is 100% normal, it's okay and you need to give yourself permission to just do whatever you need to do to get through this but more on that in a minute.

I want to talk about some of why it happens so you get that it's not your fault.

On the surface, the biggest, most easily blamed culprits of constant snacking lately are likely boredom, overwhelm & fear but those are the surface level causes.

At its core, stress eating, emotional eating, even binge eating, all those patterns of behaviors we develop around food develop because our brains are trying to problem solve as quickly as possible - they're basically problem-solving computers. It spends its day trying to keep you safe and alive.

That's its job and it's pretty good at it. But it's not always efficient. It's locked up there alone in your head - it can't see, hear, or feel what's going on around it so has to rely on interpreting millions of little signals it receives from your body, the way your senses are perceiving your environment and the stories it's picked up over the course of your life about who you are, what you're worth and how you should live.

It also relies on its memory bank (the habit center) for much of its problem solving which means it's problem solving behind the scenes and this is where the programming can get buggy and may drive you to the fridge a hundred times a day.

Life is busy, we're busy, we're distracted, our thoughts race, we're disconnected from our thoughts, the present moment and from our bodies and we don't like to feel uncomfortable things.

We're actively taught to ignore our bodies and listen to other people's advice about what they need.

As a result, we stop being able to hear or understand what they're telling us - but our brains are still getting the signals they send out and it drives our behaviors as a result of what signals it gets.

Here's an example of how that may be playing out to create non-stop snacking:

You wake up and remember there's no work or school, it's another day of being alone (which you're not used to) or being locked in the house with kids and a spouse all day (which you're also not used to). You remember your parents are in a high risk zone and wonder how long this will last. You sigh - you're trying to stay positive but those realizations come with some kind of feelings.

Your brain gets the signal that you're feeling some kind of way - in this case, probably fear, maybe overwhelm, uncertainty and dread.

That's a trigger. And you probably don't even notice it happening because you've already got kids screaming in your ear and you're promising yourself you're going to get back on track and be good with food today, which then makes your brain afraid it's not going to get it's favorite breakfast sandwich.

The survival center in your brain is now officially in overdrive over the thought of not being able to eat what you want if you're being good, but you don't even notice whatever feelings landed in your body with all those thoughts because there's too much going on and you're not connected to anything going on inside yourself.

And it's okay, you don't have to worry about sorting out any of those thoughts and feelings anyway because your brain has your back! It's on the job! It's already gotten the signals from your body about the emotions those thoughts produced and searched it's memory banks for a solution.

In less than a fraction of a second it remembered that time in 1984 when you were little and upset - Grandma gave you a cookie and a hug and told you everything was going to be okay. It felt really good and made you feel better.

Your brain saved that moment in its "solution to feelings of upset" file so it could pull it back up faster the next time you were upset. At the same time, it remembers the other 2945732 times since then, that food has made things feel better. So, it determines food is the answer - perhaps even so specifically that it determines a cookie is the answer.

Before you even realize what you're doing, you're standing in front of the pantry reaching for the cookies.

And you have no chance of even figuring out what just drove you to the pantry for those cookies because now your thoughts are too busy doing this to be aware of anything else:

"What are you doing reaching for the cookies again?"

"STOP! Omg, you're going to gain 20lbs by the time this is over! STOP EATING."

You're instantly flooded with a hefty shot of fear (which drives you want the cookie even more) over the thought of gaining weight but don't even notice because the thoughts are still going...

"I'll just have one."

"God you're so pathetic. You were supposed to start being good again today - it's not even 10am and look at you, already eating cookies again."

Oh well, may as well just eat the rest of them, since I already blew it. I'll start over tomorrow (or when this crisis is over), for real."

And the rest of the day ends up following that same pattern - perhaps even the week, month, year. Even if it's just boredom.

Your brain determines there's a problem and searches for a solution without you even knowing what's happening. There's zero awareness, just a drive to eat.

It goes like this: trigger that you probably don't even notice has occurred > brain searches for solution > determines it's food > you reach for food and Pft... the diet or any attempts to "be good with food" is blown and you're feeling all guilty and bad.

But, because it's all happening behind the scenes in your head, you have no idea it's even happening.

That's a pretty normal pattern for most people - so if you've been judging yourself and worried about weight gain, try to start reminding yourself that it's not helpful. Let that stuff go.

The reality is, the choices you've been making may not always be the most nourishing but they are always serving a purpose, so they're okay!

I know that sounds crazy but here's the thing, we can recognize when we're doing something that may not serve our best interests long term, perhaps may even be full on self-destructive, or what we would normally judge to be "bad" but IN THE MOMENT, when we're making a choice, any choice, we're doing the best we can with what we know or are capable of in that moment.

So if everything I'm doing is serving me in some way, in the moment, how can it be bad?

As someone who spent close to 30 years feeding emotions. I didn't learn to stop by judging myself for it or trying to force myself to stop. I learned to stop, in part, by recognizing that... Feeding emotions or eating for reasons other than hunger aren't always bad things and even if we're doing them in ways that make us sick, judging ourselves for it, only makes it worse.

What we need in those times is self-compassion. Grace, self-compassion, kindness and love.

Learning to just be with normal emotions can be tough enough on a good day and right now most people are trying to manage some pretty overwhelming, monstrous sized emotions probably way beyond anything they've ever experienced before.

It's OKAY if what you're feeling sometimes just feels too big to be with on your own.

Think of food like a hug or a friend holding your hand in those cases.

It's just giving you a little extra support when you need it most.

It's human to need help sometimes and it's also human to lean on food for it sometimes. So, sometimes, in the moment, eating the cookie (or whatever) may be the kindest choice you can make for yourself.

For me the distinction lies between whether or not it's being done from kindness and support and making you feel a little better or shame and punishment and making you feel worse and understanding that again requires awareness.

Now, most advice for mindless, emotional and autopilot eating is, again in my experience, fairly unhelpful because it's basically just lists of activities you can do instead of eat or a list of foods to not eat.

Those things are completely dismissive of exactly how powerful the drive to eat can feel and they do nothing about the wiring in your brain that keeps causing it.

What happens when no matter how hard you try, you feel like you can't stop eating the things on that list of no-no foods? And what happens AFTER you do everything on those lists of activities and you still want to eat your way through the entire kitchen? You feel even worse because you feel like you're failing. But you're not failing.

There's a reason you feel like eating. Something is driving that action - there's something going on in us that we're trying to fix with food because without awareness, we're unable to identify what the actual need is. Trying to not eat or busy yourself so you don't think about it doesn't do anything to help give you what you actually need - particularly since there are triggers everywhere. It's impractical to suggest trying to willpower or busy yourself through every trigger for the rest of your life.

Just so you know that I get it, my own mindlessly, emotional and even binge eating used to be so bad that I would go to bed most nights actually afraid I was going to die in my sleep I'd eaten so much. My heart would palpitate, my fingers would be numb, I'd be throwing up in my mouth and so full that I couldn't even take deep breaths.

My drive to eat was STRONG - and now it's gone. All of it. I have not been mindlessly snacking at all, through all this. I don't even think about food or eat till uncomfortably full anymore.

I'd tell you that's how good my self-control is now except that it doesn't even feel like self-control - all those thoughts and driving forces are just gone.

When I notice my stomach sending me a cue that I'm hungry, I make a decision about what I'm going to eat based on how I feel. Maybe I feel like a sandwich. Maybe I'm not super hungry and a bowl of fresh broccoli will do. Maybe I just feel like something sweet and want a few pieces of candy. Maybe I haven't had pizza in a while and I feel like a few slices of that, maybe I didn't have enough green things today and I'm craving a salad - let me tell you 10 years ago, I NEVER ever would have thought the day would come that I would actually crave vegetables - but here we are.

I eat what I want when I'm hungry, and stop when I'm full enough that I just don't want more.

And, that's how it's supposed to work. We're born into bodies that can be trusted with food - we just get stuck trying to listen to a lot of destructive outside messaging about food, and with brains that take over the decision making. I never, never, never thought I could learn to live this free from it all and that's a sentiment I hear repeated in my clients all the time.

THE HOW

Once I understood all that stuff wasn't my fault and it was just being driven by the stuff going on inside, I went inside to start changing it.

And that's what you have to do because cognition (what the brain does - thoughts, beliefs, feelings) and behavior (what the body does as a result - physical states, actions, behaviors) are inseparable.

Cognitive behavior therapy (or CBT) teaches us to understand the connection between them. It teaches us how our thoughts, feelings and behaviors are generating our results and it teaches us tools and strategies to manage them all in a more way that supports our physical and mental well-being.

Mindfulness keeps us present in the moment to make awareness easier and gives us the opportunity to take advantage of the space between thoughts, feelings and actions to choose a different response.

Cognitive eating is the combined power of mindfulness, CBT and some intuitive eating element broken down into a step by step process that focuses their combined power on the struggles damn near everyone has, with food because like everything else in life, our relationships with food, ourselves and our bodies are formed through the thoughts, beliefs, habits, and behaviors that are usually unconsciously developed over the course of our lives, exactly like everything else about us -- and those are the things that drive our behaviors -- they drive why we eat the way we eat.

In the example I gave earlier to help illustrate how this plays out in real life lately, I talked about the thoughts creating feelings of fear, dread, overwhelm, etc and those feelings driving us to the pantry. That's how it works.

Another example that almost everyone can relate to during normal times is the messaging we get around certain foods, in this case I'll use sugar as the example.

We're told sugar is bad, so the thought "Sugar is bad, it's addictive, etc" creates the belief that we shouldn't ever eat it again and if we do, we are somehow bad. That creates the fear response in our brain that causes us to crave, cave and even, in many cases, self-punish by eating more of it.

Have you ever eaten something bad, swearing you were only going to have a little bit and then noticed yourself talking yourself into eating so much that you feel sick because, "may as well eat the rest, you already screwed up anyway". That's a perfect example of that cycle in action. That's what that is, a thought creating a belief, together they create feelings, and certain behaviors result. When thoughts and beliefs make us feel like we're bad, self-punishing becomes one of the behaviors and it all just creates a never ending cycle.

WHAT YOU CAN START DOING RIGHT NOW

I mentioned a minute ago that it requires going inside - so we use mindful awareness to first start being aware of our thoughts.

Noticing... What are we saying to ourselves? Noticing... How are those things making us feel? What are some of the things we commonly do when we feel that way? We use that awareness to evaluate the validity of our thoughts - is that even true? Is that thought helping me or making me feel worse? And we work to change them if they're not helping. What can I think instead?

We go inside our bodies to learn to listen to them and give them more power over the decisions we make for them rather than letting our brain do so unconsciously.

And we learn better ways to manage our emotions through things that help us to calm down, or by changing perspective, or learning to sit with them.

I shared a few strategies for finding calm in last week's event and the recording is on our youtube channels. One of the strategies to support emotional regulation that I shared last week were these five shifts to start practicing but these are actually core principles that I've built into Cognitive Eating because they create a huge shift in your relationship with food as well help with that understanding and address many of the biggest causes.

FIVE KEY SHIFTS

Permission: Full permission to eat whatever you want, whenever you want. This works by correcting two causes, the restriction that makes your brain freak out and crave things and it helps stop self-punishing behaviors that are related to any guilt and shame you feel around the way you eat. So, permission. Eat whatever you want, whenever you want.

Acceptance: It sucks to feel controlled by food or like you can't stop snacking or like you need to lose weight. It doesn't feel good. But sulking and wallowing about our reality doesn't help change it, it only keeps us stuck in it. On top of that self acceptance is huge because without it, we're going through life full on rejecting parts of ourselves, and rejection isn't healthy, nor does it promote healthy behaviors especially when it's our own rejection. So the sooner we can just accept that this is where we are, and that we have the power to change it, the sooner we can get to the real work.

Kindness: There are a million reasons why you need to start being kinder to yourself, starting right now and not the least of which is because you will never, ever find the answers you seek to what's driving some of your deepest rooted food issues while you're beating on yourself, nor will you be able to change them.

Compassion: Studies have shown that people who practice self compassion are happier, healthier and even, usually more successful than people who don't. I cannot stress enough how important it is to practice self-compassion. It also helps us learn to be more kind to ourselves and manage emotions.

Curiosity: Most people get scared of the permission element and rightly so, permission alone isn't a magic fix. It also requires all the above elements and most of all, this one. Curiosity because that's how awareness happens. Start just noticing how you feel after you eat. How are your food choices making your body feel? What makes your body feel its best? What makes it feel worst? With full permission, acceptance, kindness, and compassion, when we stop all those obsessive, intrusive and destructive food and weight thoughts we're present moment awareness and exploring the relationships between our thoughts, beliefs and behaviors really starts to work magic. If your food struggles aren't super deeply rooted, the following will be pretty much the answer to reversing most of them and if it's not, that's how you'll at least know you need to dig deeper and have a place to start to doing that. If you need more help with it, that's what Cognitive Eating has been designed for.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE



1 Stop trying to "be good with food" and just eat whatever you want. This helps remove the added fear and guilt that food rules create and helps to stop the cravings and obsessions that are caused by food restrictions. I KNOW this feels scary but I always ask clients, how has trying to "be good" working for you?

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Pause for a second before eating to ask am I physically hungry? Do a quick body scan to notice what you're feeling. This helps you start reconnecting with your body - from the inside.

We tend to spend all our time looking for solutions to our problems in everything outside ourselves but we actually experience life from inside our bodies, so if we want to change what we're experiencing in life, that's where we have to go. We have to go inside to start noticing and connecting with everything we're thinking and feeling and noticing how our choices are impacting how we're feeling.

This is a really important point to drive home. If you want to change the way you're experiencing life (that is, the way you eat, think, feel, act, etc), you have to make those changes by going into your body & deeply connecting with what it's like to experience life in your body right now.

With NO judgment around your choices, and with a heart full of love and compassion, notice - what is it feel like to experience life in your body if you binge eat a whole pizza with 3 glasses of wine and a half dozen cookies? Remember no judgment, because those choices were serving some kind of purpose at the time, it's just about living in it and really feeling that experience from love. What does it feel like? What would you say to your daughter or your friend if she was making herself feel that way? Do you really want to keep feeling that way? What does it feel like if you eat a cookie instead of broccoli? It's not about the cookie being wrong and the broccoli being right, it's about noticing, how does each make it physically feel to live in your body? I've had many clients go through this process and start noticing that certain vegetables give them cramps or make them feel awful - but they never noticed before, because they were so busy trying to force themselves to eat what they thought they were supposed to, in order to be good they completely unaware of the impact the things they were eating were having on their bodies. I'm pulling out the first two random foods that I thought of and it's not meant to suggest that I'm advocating eating cookies instead of vegetables only to point out that YOUR body will tell you. AND, as you begin to learn about what makes your body feel its best by physically experiencing the discomfort, you begin to want the things that make it feel terrible, less and less. Think of it like touching a hot stove - only not so dramatically. You'd only burn yourself once before you start thinking, yeah, I really don't want to burn myself again.

In some instances it may be enough to get warnings from others to not want to do things that have a negative effect on us - most of us have never stepped out in front of car because we were taught that's not a positive choice for our bodies. We don't need to physically get hit by the car to not want to do it - but food is different because we tend to build deeply rooted, very personal relationships with it. So for many of us, we need to make that physical connection between the food & the feeling. I cannot possibly overstate how powerfully transformative this switch is.

What if you don't care?

You may notice sometimes, in the beginning, when you ask yourself, do I want to feel that way, that you'll think, I don't care, I just want it. This make mistakenly make you believe the process won't work for you.

Not true, it just means you need more work on valuing yourself enough to want to be kind to your body, first.

Several years ago, one of the winter's my depression was at its worst, I was very aware that I was eating way too much of way too many things that were making me like absolute crap.

I knew I was doing it, I had already been practicing these things for awhile and yet for this particular few month period, I just couldn't stop myself. I kept asking, whyyy... you know you're making yourself sick, why do you keep doing this? Don't you want to feel good? And one day, with that one question, I heard the answer, no pop into my head. It startled me for a second because I wasn't expecting that and I realized, I'm doing this to myself on purpose. I am purposely making myself sick. So I asked why? Why don't you want to feel good? Then I heard... because you don't deserve to. Again, I was blown away - wasn't expecting that. But that was my truth at that stage of my journey.

I didn't believe I deserved to feel good so I was purposely punishing myself with food and it's a pattern I see repeated in alllllll the time. We treat ourselves the way we feel like we deserve to be treated so if we're purposely eating things that we know are going to make us sick, we're punishing ourselves and that only stops when we stop feeling like we deserve to be punished. When I realized that, I realized that it wasn't the process not working, it was just that there was some other stuff going on that I needed to address before it would. So that's what I did _ worked harder on giving myself compassion, kindness, acceptance and love and I started really digging into all the reasons I thought I deserved to be punished.



If you're not physically hungry, that's a cue that you've been triggered by something so notice - what just happened? What was I just thinking about? What am I feeling emotionally? What do I actually need right now? And two big ones: how will I feel if I eat that and do I want to feel that way? This helps create a space of awareness between trigger and behavior and that space is where your power lies - that's where automatic programming can start getting rewired because it shuts off the behavior long enough for you to make a conscious choice. That's the first step. For a while, you may still choose to eat. That's normal in the beginning and it's important that you always know that you can. It's a process that happens in steps - the first step is just pausing the autopilot for a second to notice and ask, without judgment and from kindness and compassion... what's driving this choice right now and do I really want to feel the way eating that is going to make me feel? This changes decision making from being fear or guilt based (it's bad or addictive so I can't have it) to love and trust based (I can have whatever I want and trust myself to know what the kindest choice I can make for myself is right now).

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Learn to understand and manage your emotions without food. How? It depends on the emotion and the situation. Sometimes simply looking for ways to change your perspective on things can help. For example, what can I find to be grateful for right now? Sometimes reducing or eliminating triggers can help. Is the news or social media triggering you? Stop engaging with so much of it. And sometimes, you just have to sit with them. Bring in the self-compassion element noticing what you're feeling, name and accept whatever it is. I'm feeling super anxious right now and that's okay. Remind yourself that everyone gets anxious sometimes, it's normal. And extend yourself kindness - put your hands over your heart if you have to and repeat things like, I choose to send this feelings of kindness. Sometimes our pain, suffering, and uncomfortable emotions really just need to be seen, heard and given love.

When we remove all the thoughts about what we should or shouldn't be eating, what's good or bad, there are no food judgments present - all the feelings and behaviors that are being driven by those thoughts are simply gone.

And when we rewire our brain to stop believing food is the answer to everything, we stop being driven to eat non-stop every time we're potentially triggered. Those things are just gone.

This is the power of staying connected to ourselves.

I created Cognitive Eating as a step by step process to help guide even the most stubborn cases of stress, emotional and even binge eating so if you need help diving into these things more and support along the way, from someone who has lived it, visit www.ronidavis.com/cognitive-eating for more information, including how to join.

ABOUT RONI DAVIS

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Roni is a podcaster, speaker, writer, creator of Cognitive Eating and coach for almost a decade.

She struggled with weight, food, with disordered eating, an eating disorder, crippling depression, an anxiety disorder and panic attacks for most of her life.

She's also been a nationally qualified champion figure athlete, and spent over 8 years as an award-winning personal trainer and nutrition and wellness coach.

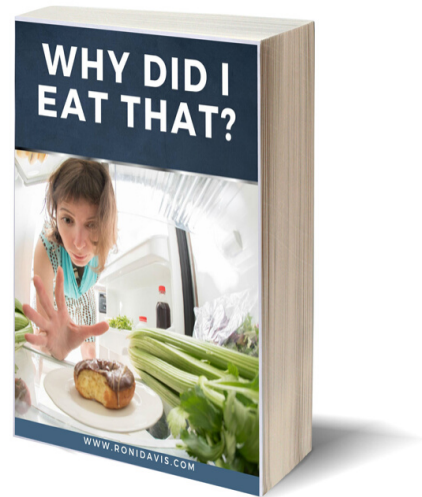
RESOURCES

FREE EBOOK

Dive even deeper into understanding the weight and food struggle, why it's not your fault and how to break free with Why'd I Eat That?

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