

The Emotional Side of Dieting

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Like many other overweight Bangladeshi teenagers, I too, was relentlessly fat shamed out of “concern for my health” by everyone. From relatives to peers, it seemed like everyone had something to say. So, I decided to throw in the towel and surrender to a series of unfortunate attempts at dieting.

I say unfortunate because the Bangladeshi “dieting” scene revolves around handing out a pre-made or slightly customised diet plan that lists what you must eat and what you must avoid, and when. My numerous attempts at losing weight told me how many almonds to eat a day but did not tell me why I keep finding myself binge eating whenever I am stressed.

Our unhealthy eating habits and, in extreme cases, eating disorders, are greatly impacted by emotional and psychological factors. Furthermore, many people struggling to maintain a healthy weight through dieting may be emotional eaters. Emotional eating is a condition where the person suffering from it tends to eat whenever they feel fluctuations in their emotional state.

In my experience of going through a whole host of dieticians over the years, not one person mentioned my emotional well-being while dieting, or referred to my relationship with food. Never did they mention that my relationship with food might not be improving because I have mental blocks that I need to overcome. Instead, they told me that “I am bad at dieting.”

When I pointed out to them that I might be an emotional eater and asked for advice, it was dismissed with an offhand comment along the lines of, “Oh, everyone is an emotional eater, it’s all about will power so just stick to the diet.”

Stick to the diet, they said. However, is it reasonable to expect someone to follow a strict diet when the person in question cannot make a distinction between emotional eating and eating out of genuine hunger?

Although people seem to be becoming more health

conscious day-by-day, the general understanding of following a diet plan in Bangladesh often includes skipping meals to “lose weight.” Therefore, in a typical Bangladeshi dieting scene, with its preconceived notion that people struggling with weight issues are just lazy and lack will power, there is also a lack of emotional support for people who are seeking to make changes in their lifestyles and eating habits.

Diane Robinson, Ph.D., a neuropsychologist, and program director of Integrative Medicine at Orlando Health said in her interview with *PsychCentral* that, “Most people focus almost entirely on the physical aspects of weight loss, like diet and exercise. But there is an emotional component to food that the vast

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majority of people simply overlook, and it can quickly sabotage their efforts.”

While some dieticians are ignorant of the emotional aspect of dieting, on the other side of the spectrum, there are some dieticians who use “eating disorder” as an excuse for their failing diet plans without a proper psychological assessment.

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Sabekun Nahar Mumu, a practicing dietician at Evercare Hospital Dhaka says, “Certified dieticians in Bangladesh are trained on patient counselling but the training is not extensive or practical enough for them to treat patients with eating disorders. They are expected to refer such patients to a psychologist. The problem here is that the number of psychologists in Bangladesh

who deal with eating disorders is not sufficient.”

People who go to dieticians are often people who have experienced body shaming to some extent and are sensitive to judgmental comments. This is why it is especially important that practicing dieticians take the emotional side of dieting more seriously, so that people do not end up being misdiagnosed or have their concerns dismissed without assessment.

Tunzida Yousuf Chhonda, Managing Director and CEO at Cfitz women’s fitness centre, who also works as a fitness expert, mentions, “Well reputed dieticians have the psychological training necessary to deal with emotional eaters. However, I have my doubts that some may not be as adequately equipped or trained as others. This needs to change, whether it is a curricular issue or a training issue, the field needs to adopt the psychological effects of emotional eating into its territory.”

Mumu also points out that although graduates from food and nutrition who go into the clinical side are given training through an internship period, it is not widely available or enforced everywhere.

For this field to take into consideration the emotional and psychological side of dieting, it is imperative for dieticians to receive better training and practice empathy towards the clients they help. Otherwise, they may end up doing more harm than good.

References

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When Tazreen is not pretending to be a high-brow literary critic, she quite likes Rupi Kaur’s poetry collections. Send verbal eye-rolls at tazreenzahan@gmail.com

