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From the SelectedWorks of Milton E. Becknell, Ph.D.

Summer 2013

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/milton_becknell/37/
It’s the Thought That Counts

by Milton Becknell

It’s 8:45 p.m., and your favorite show is on a commercial break. Immune from “all that marketing,” you get up and walk away from the TV. You’re not tempted by sizzling steak two-for-one deals at this hour, and you wonder who really buys pizza and hot dogs at a gas station. The ads are so loud you can hear them all the way from the kitchen. “Who ever heard of a ‘fourth meal?’” you scoff, as you open the freezer and reach for the ice cream. “They’ll say anything to sell $.99 tacos.” Two scoops of chocolate fudge brownie later, you’re feeling serene as the credits roll. Hey, where’d that dirty dish come from?

Dr. Milton Becknell, Professor of Psychology at Cedarville, explains the physiological basis for our cravings and offers advice to overcome them ... so put down that spoon.

You’ve heard the adage “You are what you eat.” While this may be hyperbole, we know from 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 that as Christ-followers, our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit. We are “not our own” and have been “bought with a price.” It takes self-awareness, or what Socrates called “knowing ourselves,” to steward our bodies — choosing our behavior patterns and environments wisely.

Understanding Our Thoughts

It’s a simple fact that eating feels good, and we do love to eat. God designed our brains to emphatically respond when we engage in pleasurable activities such as eating. The brain’s pleasure center is located primarily in the ventral tegmental area (at the top of the brain stem). It projects through the pathways of the neurotransmitter dopamine to the nucleus accumbens.

Practically speaking, when you are eating that bowl of ice cream, the nucleus accumbens floods with dopamine, the neurotransmitter associated with good feelings as well as addiction. The dopamine sends a powerful message to the prefrontal cortex that controls our executive functions, including decision-making. In the words of country singer Tim McGraw, the message your brain receives goes something like this: “I like it. I love it. I want some more of it.”

What you and I call “craving” is the culmination of a series of chemical activities in our brains. When we continue to pursue the coveted pleasure effect, our prefrontal cortex creatively finds ways to seek out and justify the things we enjoy. Ironically, research has shown that in that bowl of ice cream, it is only about the first three and last three bites that we actually remember as pleasurable. The rest of the ice cream is just a blur and, for all intents and purposes, never happened (of course the scale remembers it differently). If we respond only to the pleasure message, it can lead to a pattern of overconsumption and unhealthy weight gain.

Changing Our Behaviors

It is safe to assume that most people generally aspire to be healthy, yet the prevalence of obesity in America has tripled since the early 1990s. What is wrong with this picture? The apostle Paul, perhaps, said it best: “For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Rom. 7:15). Although we know better, we bypass what is healthy and often choose destructive behavior patterns that are contrary to our goals. Lysa TerKeurst, in her best-selling book Made to Crave, said, “Inside a danger zone, the lies and rationalizations of the enemy sing so sweetly.” Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu admonishes us to “know ourselves and to know our enemy” if we want to be victorious. Solomon adds further that “The wisdom of the sensible is to understand his way, but the foolishness of fools is deceit” (Prov. 14:8).

Paul, again, gives us the understatement, “I do not understand what I do.” There’s a simple cause-and-effect equation found in Galatians 6:7 — we reap what we sow. This is a rational conclusion, but changing our behavior involves more than just thinking rationally. As a clinical health psychologist, I assess a patient’s readiness to change before launching into a specific treatment or intervention. To use terminology from psychologists James Prochaska and Carlo
DiClemente’s Transtheoretical Model, a person who aspires to make a lifestyle change may be “ready,” “thinking about” it, or “thinking about thinking about” it (i.e., not ready). Those in the last group primarily desire the end results of a lifestyle change. Those in the first group are eager to do whatever it takes to attain the end results.

Unfortunately, some are unwilling to make changes in their eating and exercise behavior until they face a major health crisis. As the 18th-century English writer Samuel Johnson put it, “When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.” Health care professionals and accountability groups like Weight Watchers can be invaluable in the change process by providing important tools for change, but ultimately it is up to the individual.

We are creatures of habit, and fortunately, habits can be modified. To tame our food cravings, as with all other behavior modification, change comes when you’re ready to set boundaries and choose not to go beyond them.

**Overcoming Our Temptations**

While it is true that some people are predisposed to struggle with their weight, genetics accounts for approximately 30 percent of the obesity equation. The remaining majority, where much of the power lies, is the choices we make about our food environment, which Yale University psychologist Kelly Brownell has called “toxic.” Most of our white-collar jobs require minimal physical activity — eight hours or more a day sitting in front of a computer. Coupled with increased consumption of high-fat, low-priced convenience foods, it’s no wonder so many Americans are overweight. As psychologist James Bray concluded, “Genetics loads the gun, but environment pulls the trigger.”

But we are not powerless against our toxic food environment. It is more within our control than most of us would believe. When Paul writes, “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind” and that God “will provide a way out so that you can endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13), temptation includes those trigger foods that lure you to the kitchen during the commercial break. The easiest way to resist that specific temptation is to simply keep those foods out of the house and out of your easy reach — out of sight, out of mind.

“Don’t Blow It” is a simple memory tool I use with patients struggling with counterproductive behaviors to help them reclaim control of their environments and their lives:

- **Be able to refuse.** If the bowl of ice cream will sabotage your goals, it’s OK to say no.
- **Leave the situation.** Choosing to walk away puts you back in control of the situation.
- **One leads to another.** Whether it’s one cigarette, one drink, one bet, or one bite, the margin between victory and defeat is determined by a series of small choices.
- **Wait out the craving.** Most cravings will subside within about 15 minutes.

It’s amazing how unhealthy thinking distorts both your sense of time and reality: “If I don’t have that right now, my head will explode.”
Set realistic, measurable goals.

Keep trigger foods out of your house and out of your reach.

Get at least seven hours of sleep each night to reduce carbohydrate cravings.

Take at least 20 minutes to eat a meal. It takes that long to begin to feel full.

Put your fork down between bites to slow your pace of eating.

Find a way to distract your mind and body. Most cravings will subside within 15 minutes.

Set clear boundaries and stay within them.

Develop a backup plan so a temporary lapse will not derail your progress.

Strive for modest goals for weight loss; just 1–2 pounds per week is the most sustainable long term.

Choose an exercise you enjoy and will stick with for 30 minutes a day, four or five times a week.

Start low and go slow to ensure steady progress.

It's not about simply having more willpower — this can be elusive. Practically speaking, it's more about being mindful of the patterns of our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Proverbs 23:7 reminds us that as a person “thinks in his heart, so is he.”

We are indeed more than just our thoughts or our emotions, but they significantly contribute to the behavioral choices we make. While we may have spontaneous thoughts that are not compatible with our health goals, these need not dominate our thinking. Paul reminds us that we are responsible for our choices, and he encourages us to dwell on what is good (Phil. 4:8).

God designed us to eat, and He created a variety of foods for us to enjoy. But like all of His good and perfect gifts, we are called to be stewards of both our bodies and the foods He has given us to nourish them. Galatians 5 tells us that we are called to freedom, but we are warned not to let our freedom be our undoing. Paul’s admonition that everything is permissible but not everything is helpful (1 Cor. 6:12) provides a balanced perspective that empowers us to make better choices in our behaviors and our environments so we can freely enjoy God’s gift of food without letting it have mastery over us.

The goal is improved overall health. When we make lifestyle choices compatible with that goal, we are more likely to please God and improve our quality of life.

Milton Becknell is a Professor of Psychology at Cedarville. He received his Ph.D. in counseling psychology from the University of Southern Mississippi, and he is board certified in clinical health psychology by the American Board of Professional Psychology. He is a licensed psychologist in Ohio, and he maintains a small private practice in Centerville, Ohio. You may contact Dr. Becknell at becknell@cedarville.edu.

For further reading: Made to Crave by Lysa TerKeurst; The LEARN Program for Weight Management by Kelly Brownell; Dr. Dean Ornish’s Program for Reversing Heart Disease by Dean Ornish.

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