

EMOTION AND ADDICTION

We need to learn to deal directly with painful feelings rather than attempt to self-medicate our emotional escape.



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The Word of Wisdom, found in Doctrine and Covenants 89, is the Lord’s code of health as revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith. It advises us to eat nutritious foods and warns against using harmful substances like strong drinks (alcohol), tobacco, and hot drinks (tea and coffee). Prophets have since taught that harmful substances include all substances and practices that harm our bodies or minds and that could lead to addiction.¹

Regarding the Word of Wisdom, President Boyd K. Packer (1924–2015), President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, explained: “There are many habit-forming, addictive things that one can drink or chew or

inhale or inject which injure both body and spirit which are not mentioned in the revelation. Everything harmful is not specifically listed.” He added that “he who must be commanded in all things . . . ‘is a slothful and not a wise servant’ (D&C 58:26).”² We each have a responsibility to learn the do’s and don’ts of healthy living that are not necessarily spelled out in the Word of Wisdom.

I believe that Satan understands the processes that make the natural man susceptible to the enslavement of compulsive behaviors and addictions. In this article I describe how the misuse of food to manage stress and emotional pain can operate like an addiction, and I share some solutions.



Patterns of Eating

Although food is not addictive in and of itself, certain patterns of eating can become like an addiction. Consuming sweet, fatty, or salty foods (or any combination of these) may help us avoid, escape from, or suppress painful emotions. Such foods function to relieve our stress by activating pleasure pathways in the brain.³

Most of us engage in comfort eating at times, but the consequences of using food to cope with the stresses of life are complex and can be serious. The numerous adverse consequences of persistent overeating include weight gain, self-image concerns, lethargy, reduced concentration, an imbalanced diet, harmful weight-loss practices, reduced mobility, spiritual numbing, and diabetes.

Contributing Factors

I don't wish to condemn those who struggle with comfort eating or overeating, as the causes are also complex. Contributing factors may include the effects of modern

technology (such as ready access to food in refrigerators); the availability of foods that are effective for self-medicating (people don't usually eat carrots for comfort food); inadequate care or nurturance during childhood, which can contribute to the establishment of self-soothing patterns; cultural factors or patterns of eating; and the influence of consumer behavior (marketing), to name but a few.

The latter point is worth further consideration. The Lord revealed, "In consequence of evils and designs which do and will exist in the hearts of conspiring men in the last days, I have warned you, and forewarn you, by giving unto you this word of wisdom by revelation" (D&C 89:4). Multi-billion-dollar industries seek to entice us to use foods for purposes and in quantities that are unhealthy. Counter to what many corporations want, the Lord counsels us to use certain substances with "prudence" and "sparingly" (D&C 89:11, 12).



Managing Negative Emotions

Having worked for three decades with clients who struggle with unhealthy eating patterns, I have learned that people can overcome even persistent patterns of overeating or restrictive eating. A number of critical elements are needed for change, but the one I wish to elaborate upon is the need to manage negative emotions in more direct and healthy ways.

It is natural for us to seek to reduce suffering, but how we do so is key. Escaping from or suppressing painful feelings in unhealthy ways usually provides limited relief and certainly does not solve the problems that trigger such feelings. I suggest that we learn to approach our suffering and deal directly with painful feelings rather than escape from them in unhealthy ways. The following suggestions are not exhaustive but may provide some guidance:

1. Take time for negative feelings. Feel them and observe them. Such a process is the enemy of addiction. One cannot learn how to manage feelings without paying some attention to them. Sometimes negative emotions will pass if we simply allow ourselves to observe and experience them.

2. Find productive ways to express negative feelings. Jesus taught, “Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). I wonder if the Savior

is teaching that there is a helpful relationship between the outward expression of our sorrow and the receipt of comfort. Expressing the painful feelings of our hearts can occur through open and heartfelt prayer, talking to a loved one or a Church leader, writing in a personal journal, or counseling with a professional.

3. Reduce self-condemnation. Self-condemnation seldom helps us work through our struggles with negative emotion. Negative emotions are a normal, expected part of life. They do not automatically mean we lack faith or are unrighteous. Even when our painful emotions relate to our sins or shortcomings, we do not help ourselves by condemning ourselves. President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) explained: “Jesus saw sin as wrong but also was able to see sin as springing from deep and unmet needs. . . . This permitted him to condemn the sin without condemning the individual.”⁴

4. Identify and correct wrong beliefs. Expressing our negative emotions can help us become aware of beliefs or thought patterns that fuel emotional pain. Dr. Martin Seligman, known for his research on optimism, describes ways to dispute negative or distorted beliefs. They include examining the evidence supporting or disconfirming our beliefs, seeking alternative explanations for our judgments,

As we take positive steps to examine and productively express negative feelings, the Holy Spirit will teach us to better understand our emotional struggles.

and examining the implications of our beliefs to temper overly extreme predictions.⁵ Also, we need to remember that the Holy Spirit can help us understand in different ways and teach us all things (see John 14:26).

5. Seek to solve directly the problems that are causing feelings of distress. For example, if we are overwhelmed by a child-rearing challenge, then we may need to learn and implement more effective parenting strategies. If our employment is not producing sufficient income, then we may need to complete additional career training or explore ways to find better-paying employment. Negative or stressful emotions can sometimes alert us to real-life problems that require a solution. Numbing such feelings through overeating or some other avoidance behavior is obviously not a helpful solution.

6. Serve others even while going through personal emotional struggles. Lehi taught that good and bad experiences coexist (see 2 Nephi 2:11). Using our time and talents to bless others can edify us and change our perspective. But we need to be careful not to serve others as a way to avoid dealing with negative emotions or problems.

7. Learn not to get stuck in negative emotions and suffering. Once we have taken positive steps to manage our suffering, we need to notice when our minds are going over the same negative stories we have already given sufficient time to.

8. Use the many resources the Church has made available on its various websites.⁶

The Process of Healing

A past client, Meredith (name has been changed), exemplified some of these processes. Abusive childhood and adolescent experiences caused her to suffer in silence for many years. She kept up a competent facade, but inwardly she suffered all the agonizing effects of abuse and experienced a deep feeling of worthlessness.

One of Meredith's coping strategies involved numbing her painful emotions with unhealthy eating patterns. This

strategy was in some ways healthier than acting upon her constant suicidal feelings and urges. With counseling, Meredith made the courageous decision to face her pain and open up to herself and to others she trusted, including her supportive husband. Although opening up intensified her suffering in the short term, it allowed the process of healing to progress.

During her childhood, Meredith's relationship with Heavenly Father had been affected when her repeated prayers for the abuse to stop had no apparent effect. Thus her relationship with Heavenly Father and her prayers over time became superficial at best. She felt unworthy of His love, did not expect that He would value her enough to help her, and had no hope that she could ever be worthy to return to His presence.

One day she took the risk to pray to her Heavenly Father in a frank and honest manner. Meredith shared with Him what she was really feeling and experiencing. Her emotions were raw and tears flowed. The ensuing 45 minutes were emotionally agonizing and exhausting, but Meredith had a small but significant experience. During this prayer a phrase came into her mind that she recognized as a message from her Father in Heaven: "Everything will be OK." This small message of hope came as a consequence of her ceasing to suppress and avoid her pain.

Rather than turn to harmful substances or patterns of behavior, may we instead turn to our Father in Heaven and our Savior. May we more earnestly follow the Savior's invitation: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). ■

NOTES

1. See "Catching the Vision of Self-Reliance," [lds.org/topics/welfare/the-church-welfare-plan/catching-the-vision-of-self-reliance](https://www.lds.org/topics/welfare/the-church-welfare-plan/catching-the-vision-of-self-reliance).
2. Boyd K. Packer, "The Word of Wisdom: The Principle and the Promises," *Ensign*, May 1996, 17.
3. See W. F. Mathes, K. A. Brownley, X. Mo, and C. M. Bulik, "The Biology of Binge Eating," *Appetite*, vol. 52, no. 3 (June 2009), 545–53.
4. Spencer W. Kimball, "Jesus: The Perfect Leader," *Ensign*, Aug. 1979, 5.
5. See Martin E. P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* (1990).
6. For example, see addictionrecovery.lds.org; providentliving.org; overcomingpornography.org.