



Weighty Matters

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There is no doubt that divorce like other stressful events in our lives can be a weighty matter both literally and figuratively. This often calamitous and life changing event can flood us with emotions and render our defenses as porous as Swiss cheese. During these times of crisis the ambush of poorly understood and thus often, unacceptable feelings, fantasies and impulses trigger stinging self rebukes. When we reflexively turn on ourselves with limited if any, awareness of being our own worst enemy, its human nature to react to such helplessness by looking outside ourselves for someone to blame. This is why when our children voice normal age-appropriate complaints, make demands or lodge protests that have nothing to do with the impact of divorce on their lives, we may become very defensive.

Did you ever notice the tendency at times like these to head straight for the kitchen cupboard and anesthetize emotional wounds or soothe anxieties with some chemically enhanced chocolate treat you wouldn't think of feeding to an alley cat? Or maybe you have thought about shoving such sweet morsels down our children's' throats to shut them up in anticipation of hearing shame or guilt provoking messages.

As you may infer from my last remark it is easy for human beings to confuse signals from our "emotional guts," with signals from our appetite regulating mechanisms wired to our physical guts. The emotional gut when fully functional acts like a tuning fork that we locate inside our bellies. It channels all kinds of "vibes" to higher centers of the brain where they can be translated, thought about and discharged in constructive ways. If these energies are not thought about, dysfunctional forms of feeding ourselves and our children may ensue. Psychosomatic symptoms that mimic hunger, nausea, indigestion and bloating may trick us into disordered habits of feeding. When these circumstances arise many of us no longer "eat to live," and either live to eat and/or eat largely to cope with stress in our lives.

Our emotional vulnerabilities post divorce may create an internal environment ripe for unhealthy dependencies on eating and feeding others. Eating dysfunctions, even in their most benign forms, are perhaps the most insidious, because in a society where obesity is quickly becoming the norm, they go easily undetected. One can't go "cold turkey" on eating; right or wrong? Furthermore, this activity is an acceptable social activity, a source of great pleasure and steeped in meaning based on life long associations to the earliest and most powerful experiences of being loved and cared for by trusted others. How easy it is to then, deny, minimize and rationalize this life affirming activity gone haywire. We do not run the risk of getting arrested for binge eating or dieting to the point of malnutrition. We will in all likelihood not walk around in a stupor as result of over eating or be too hung over to get our kids up for school. Have you ever heard of anyone getting busted for buying a loaf of bread on the street?

Still, dysfunctional eating patterns may for some become powerfully injurious psychological and physical addictions, and for good reasons. Just imagine for a moment, after the end of your marriage you are uncomfortable with feeling needy, too anxious to empower yourself to take on functions formerly served by a spouse, too guilty to be proactive in caring for yourself, or maybe too depressed and ashamed to the point of wishing to isolate and withdraw from valued relationships for protection from further painful disappointments and rejections. Any of these emotional scenarios may lead to us taking refuge in unhealthy dependencies on eating. Just think for a moment how we can eat to enjoy pleasurable stimulation and satisfaction, to anesthetize us to pain, to soothe anxieties, to fill inner voids, to bury and defend against toxic messages, to punish ourselves, to discharge and defend against hostile impulses, to deny shamefully excessive dependency needs, etc., etc., etc. If you don't buy into my argument, just listen for a minute to common expressions that underscore the psychological importance of eating in our lives so as to invite an over reliance on food to protect ourselves from hostile aggression turned inward and/or outward.

Perhaps, you are familiar with some or all of the following remarks: "Why don't you stuff your face and shut up." "I'm afraid I'm so hungry I'll devour you." "I'm going to chew you up and spit you out." "I need some comfort food like a Ring Ding." "I ate non-stop all night and was still hungry." "I have no idea what I'm hungry for." "I'm so frustrated I want to bite your head off." "What you just told me made me sick to my stomach." "You're so delicious I want to eat you up." "Stop shoving that garbage down my throat." "I lost my appetite when

I heard he was leaving." "I spend a lot of time during work thinking about what I will cook for dinner."

The answer to the problems created for ourselves and our children by unhealthy relationships to food is, for us as single parents, to cultivate reliable and consistent support systems that will hear us out, respect our capacities to change and grow, be non-judgmental and offer feedback in compassionate ways so as not to reinforce dysfunctional eating patterns. There is nothing that resides in our imaginations that is inherently damning. It is only our reactions to such stimuli that we have cause to be concerned about. To learn to connect with, contain, think about, reflect on and talk to trusted others about what goes on in our minds is the best insurance against disordered patterns of eating or other dysfunctional patterns of coping with stress. If we can learn to tolerate and embrace what goes on inside of us, then we will be more available to hear our children out and support them to process life experiences in healthy ways. We all deserve forgiveness for using food in defensive ways as these patterns imply that "we don't know what we do." However, if we don't break these patterns when our children are young, they may forgive us, but they will never forget us for the angst-filled obsessions and compulsions with food they may inherit from us.