

# Sustainable Health

By Abbe Grossman



## Rebel with a Cause:

The “Rebel Eater” and Its Contribution to Compulsive Eating

If the problem with overeating were simply how to lose weight, the solution would be simple: find the right diet for each person’s body and psyche. But neither food nor weight is the true underlying problem for most compulsive eaters. We don’t suffer from a paucity of diets or nutritional information. We suffer because we cycle in and out of diets ranging from macrobiotics to Weight Watchers. We practice that cycling as if we were training for an Olympic sport. And for the life of us, we can’t understand why.

There is an unconscious condition that hardly anybody talks about — not Oprah, Jenny Craig, or even your holistic family doctor. We’ll call it “food amnesia.” It’s the temporary loss of consciousness that overtakes us between the time our hands open the full bag of chips and when our eyes see the now-empty bottom. As we sit on the couch, stuffed and stunned, we utter a soft, agonized moan of defeat. “Oh my god, not again. How did this happen?”

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One of the primary factors contributing to food amnesia is the presence of what Francie White, master of science, registered dietitian and director of the Central Coast Intensive Outpatient Eating Disorder Program, calls the “rebel eater.” According to White, the rebel eater is that part our unconscious that refuses to follow food rules. In psychological terms, the rebel eater is an unconscious ego state, or part of the self. The restrictions imposed by diets, be they based on whole grains or processed foods, may trigger rebellion. As author Geneen Roth says, “For every diet, there is an equal and opposite binge.”

Let’s meet Sarah’s rebel eater, for example. After a day of raw carrot sticks and dry chicken breasts, a bag of cookies stares her in the face upon arriving home from work. Sarah thinks, “Look how fat you are. No cookies for you!” But her rebel eater says, “Ah, forget it! Don’t tell me what to eat! I’m digging in!” Suddenly, she’s eaten the whole bag and is mystified as to what happened. The rebel eater just hijacked her body.

Why does the rebel eater get triggered? We are hardwired to aggressively, sometimes violently, defend against those who would take our food. This response dates back to our cave-dwelling ancestors who, after slaughtering a mammoth, had to fend off marauding bandits intent on stealing their winter food supply. Those who were successful survived and went on to become our genetic ancestors. Those who weren’t successful died off. Therefore, “You take my food away from me, and you die” is coded into our ancestral gene pool. Straight and simple.

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So while we politely ask the nutritional expert to assist us in losing weight, listen responsibly, take notes, and pay the fee, the rebel eater is perched in the quiet recesses of our mind, ready to defend our mammoth to the death.

This force of nature cannot be underestimated. “In my decades of working with women,” says Francie White, “one thing I’ve learned is, don’t *ever* tell a woman what to eat!” Doing so just triggers the rebel eater. Until this force of nature is addressed, progress will be slow to none. This rebel has a cause — survival of both the body and the psyche.

The energetic purpose of our core self, or “soul essence,” according to the Bio Self-Emergence Institute (BSEI) in Southfield, Michigan, is to reserve its energy so the soul can survive and experience itself. The rebel, understood from BSEI’s energetic perspective on developmental stages, is not just a psychological defense mechanism. If the core self is not energetically developed and organized, it must rebel to save itself for its energetic purpose of soul survival and experience.

The “I am me” is the energetic core of who we are. Its purpose isn’t to follow or defy rules. Its purpose is to survive and to experience itself. Psychologically, we develop our “I am me” muscles with our “No!” We define and differentiate ourselves by asserting, “Noooo! I do *not* want to give you this interesting, shiny object you call a knife. Mine!” This particular bid for self-determination — holding the knife — must be denied. But sometimes the denial goes too far.

Let’s say that Sarah was the child with the knife, and her “no” was punished. She was yelled at, given the silent treatment, or labeled “selfish,” “willful,” or “stubborn.” Her parents prohibited her ability to say “no” and controlled her

verbal behavior, but they can scarcely control everything she eats. “Aha,” notices Sarah, “*this* battle, I can win. I will eat what I want to!” She wants to feel herself, her “no,” her power.

Then Sarah puts on a few extra pounds. Her parents worry. They tell her, “Don’t eat that cookie. You’ll gain weight.” Sarah’s “I am me” is threatened. The rebel eater is born. It attempts to protect the child’s still fragile and growing sense of self, her essence.

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So what happens when Sarah grows up? She eats compulsively, desperately seeking control and weight loss. Yet she pours her energy into defying deprivation and rebelling against the professionals who advise food restrictions. With one foot on the gas and one foot on the brakes, she is going nowhere fast.

If Sarah’s health professionals give her even the best of nutritional advice, it will likely exacerbate her rebel’s overeating. How, then, to address the problem? As one student of this non-diet approach aptly said, “If I can eat anything I want, there’s nothing to rebel against.” With nothing to battle and no recriminations to suffer, Sarah’s full energy and attention is freed up to notice just how much of that organic, whole-grain bread slathered with butter her *body* really desires and how much she eats out of defiance. What happens to the rebel’s overeating after consistent practice of this non-diet philosophy?

Let’s take Rachel, for example, a diabetic who struggled with food obsession and weight issues for decades. Each day began with a vow to follow the doctor’s recommendations and ended with the rebel eater’s battle cry of, “Ah forget it!” — followed by huge servings of pasta and, finally...dessert. Once again, Rachel feels defeated, resigned, and depressed.

When Rachel began practicing mindful eating, however (noticing body sensations when we eat), she was shocked one night to discover her body wanted those fresh green beans from her garden, not pasta! She had never bothered to ask before. Skeptical, but encouraged, she began asking herself, “How much body-hunger do I have right now?” and “What kind of food would satisfy that hunger right now?” She asked, “Will hot or cold, sweet or spicy, crunchy or smooth satisfy me now? Am I slightly hungry, so hungry I could faint, neutral, satisfied, or full right now?” She considered vegetables, protein, fruits and carbohydrates. She committed to suspending judgment about her body size and food. The simple act of paying attention to food choices, instead of judging them, changed how she felt about herself and her measurements.

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Rachel began to eat much less after 10 days. After eight months, she let go of most desserts. Not because she was following the diabetic guidelines. She had always rebelled against those. It was precisely the opposite. Her rebel eater had calmed down. Why? Because there was nothing to rebel against. Food was not restricted. She had the freedom to say “yes” without guilt to desserts. This earned her the freedom to say “no” without rebellion or a feeling of deprivation.

Research suggests that dieting undermines our connection to our natural mechanism for regulating food intake. This mechanism requires an *internal* focus on the body’s hunger and satiety. We need that mechanism. Diets train us to focus on *external* rules: what to eat and how much. That’s why retraining ourselves to recognize hunger and satiety is a prerequisite to releasing the rebel eater’s stronghold. Therein lies the hope for us to find balance and peace with food.

The rebel eater is just one of the players from our unconscious that contributes to overeating. But understanding that often isn’t enough. Recovery requires practicing mindful eating and releasing judgments again and again. This sounds like a lot of work, because at first it is. It often requires a non-diet support group or the guidance of a skilled professional. But the results are plentiful. We can replace the diet-rebel rollercoaster with something far more substantial: peace with ourselves and with our food.

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