

# Shrink Yourself

Break free from emotional eating  
**forever!**



(The therapist's guide to losing weight)

ROGER GOULD, M.D.

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Break Free from Emotional  
Eating Forever

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To my wife, Bonnie,  
who knows how to love, and to be loved



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# Introduction

Twenty years ago, I started working with psychotherapy outpatients who also had eating issues. When these patients told me that they had trouble controlling their weight because they ate too much, I would ask, "Why do you eat too much once you've decided not to?" You can imagine the answers I got as I pursued the question over the years. The answers ran the gamut of everything that has been reported in every self-help diet book, in every online diary, in every confessional written by the morbidly obese, the bulimic, or your average everyday overeater. "I eat because I'm ravenously hungry." "I eat because I'm bored, or lonely, or married, or single." "I eat because I pass a donut shop, or I had too much to drink, or I was at a party." "I eat because my mother cooked and I didn't want to disappoint her, or because I want to eat as much as my husband can, or I don't want to deprive myself, or I'm depressed." For years, my exploration of this question led nowhere. My patients would talk about the problem, we would understand some of the illogic behind the pattern and some of the historical connections with early family experiences, but all the explorations remained superficial. I kept on

hitting brick walls. My patients went around and around in circles, telling me things like “I ate because I was angry at Joe, vowed not to do that again, but felt so guilty about eating that I just said the hell with the diet, and went on to eat as much as I wanted. I guess I’m powerless when it comes to food, just too weak to do this right.”

Eventually it sank in. “I’m powerless” was the key. I was exploring the wrong question. It’s not “Why do you eat?” It’s “Why are you powerless?” Why, after you made a commitment to yourself to take charge of your eating, did the urge to eat become so powerful that it, or that part of you, overruled your conscious intent? There was not only an urge to eat, there was a conflict occurring between two parts of your mind fighting over who was going to control that moment when your hand moved toward the chocolate cake.

Once I had that realization, I was in familiar territory, and my understanding of the answer to the new question “Why are you powerless?” quickly grew. I saw the issues of overeating as closely aligned with those I had observed in my work developing programs for alcoholism and addiction. The alcoholic and the addict both felt they were powerless when it came to alcohol and drugs, but it was very clear that the real powerlessness was about some aspect of their life. When things went wrong, they turned to these dangerous and illegal substances, while people who struggled with their weight had found a legal, readily available tranquilizer to serve the same purpose.

I also realized that overeating issues had some relevance to the stages of life we normally go through in maturing. My book about the stages of life, *Transformations: Growth and Change in Adult Life*, was organized around one aspect of powerlessness: the question of safety. In *Shrink Yourself*, I focus on the maturation of your conscience, because it’s your overly critical conscience that creates the illusion of being powerless when you’re not really powerless. My training as a psychoanalyst immersed me in the complexities of this internal drama between you and your critical conscience, and that has become the main underlying theme of this book about taking charge of your weight and your life.

For decades, starting when I was the head of Outpatient and

Community Psychiatry at U.C.L.A, I've been developing computer-assisted psychotherapy programs to make therapy more affordable. About five years ago I put it all together to create an online step-by-step program that guides people through all the ways they unnecessarily conclude that they're helpless or powerless over their uncontrollable urge to eat. Several thousand people used my online program MasteringFood, which was the predecessor to the Shrink Yourself Hunger Coach ([www.shrinkyourself.com](http://www.shrinkyourself.com)). I'm writing this book to share what I've learned, and what has already worked for thousands of people.

All people, when it comes to controlling their weight, are looking for a simple or even magical solution. You don't need to go far to see that. Everywhere you look, someone is advertising a new diet, a new pill, a new exercise plan, or a new surgical solution. I wish I could offer you a simple way to remedy something you've struggled with for so long, but I can't. Instead, what I can offer you is something born out of years of experience. I've come to believe that the issue of powerlessness is the key to controlling your weight. It's the missing link. It's the reason your attempts to lose weight have failed or why your successes have only been temporary. What I'm offering isn't a simple solution but rather an interesting and proven process that will have you recover your power not only over food, but over many aspects of your life.

## Why Do You Eat?

Food starts off as being not just a source of life but an expression of love. At the heart of almost every culture, hospitality is shown by feeding people. And a celebration or a time of grief wouldn't be complete without food.

Using food for reasons other than simple sustenance is a normal part of life. It becomes a problem when food becomes so closely linked with feelings that the two overlap and become one. The foundation for this starts in childhood. "When I was good, I got a

cookie"; "When I fell down, I was offered food"; "On summer nights, we went to the lake to get ice cream"; "Sitting at the kitchen table eating bologna sandwiches and chips was the only time I had with my mother"; "When I misbehaved, dessert was withheld." Food was transformed from a simple source of nutrition to a reward, a diversion, a punishment, a love object, a friend. Once that happened, food became a way to control your emotions—to deal with your feelings of powerlessness. When you've installed food as a preferred way to cope, you stop developing new ways to deal with stress, your weight becomes increasingly difficult to control, and ultimately you end up reinforcing your feelings of powerlessness.

In simple terms, when something happens to bother you (such as a person ignoring you), it makes you feel bad, and you suddenly have the uncontrollable urge to eat. Then, when you eat more than you know you should, it's always followed by regret, self-hatred, and extra pounds. For many of you, the moment when something bothers you overlaps with the moment when you suddenly have the uncontrollable urge to eat. For instance, my patient Gloria, a married woman who is thirty-three years old and thirty pounds overweight, told me about an eating episode that occurred after an argument with her husband. I asked her why she chose to eat to deal with how she was feeling. She responded, "What other choice did I have?" In the next half-hour of the session, we developed six other things that she could've done instead of eating. For example, she could have taken responsibility for her part of the argument or done something to relax, like going for a walk or taking a bath, to buy herself some time to think things through and clarify her feelings. I was struck over the years by how many people were similar to Gloria. Something happened, and they felt that there wasn't any other choice but to deal with what happened by eating. They gave up because they felt powerless. By choosing food, they totally relinquished their ability to solve problems and deal with their lives in a mature and empowered way, and this naturally reinforced their experience of powerlessness. The only way to recover that power is to pause long enough to determine what other options you have besides eating when something in life troubles you. Even though it

may not be obvious that something happened that bothered you, if you suddenly find yourself starving when you know you've just eaten, you can logically suspect that you've been emotionally triggered in some way.

Extensive research has shown that you're not really starving in those moments. It's almost always emotional hunger that drives you: a fight with a spouse, an uncomfortable work situation, a lull in your workday, a needy parent or child, your life, your future, your past. It's something that sets off a brief episode of powerlessness.

This book is really about finding the space between when something has affected you and your sudden urge to eat (which is not real hunger), and then exploring what goes on in your mind when you have that uncontrollable urge. Up until now, the emotions and issues that fuel the urge to eat have been operating behind the scenes, sabotaging all of your good intentions.

## Who Will Benefit from *Shrink Yourself*?

This book will benefit anyone who feels that they have an unhealthy relationship with food. Some people aren't even overweight and yet their thoughts are still consumed with what they're going to eat and food is still the way they manage their emotions and cope with stress. Focusing on food distracts them from dealing with the other real issues in their lives. This book is for anyone who has too often used food to deal with the challenges and struggles of life.

Food, when used to make you feel better, actually impedes your ability to be informed by your feelings, to complete your emotional maturation, and to have the fulfilling life that you dream about. Once we bring the spotlight back to the real issues and take the focus away from food and weight, you'll begin to see who you really are, what you really want, and how to get it. Once you do this, you'll become like the person in love, or the child at play who doesn't want to come in for dinner, or the artist in the studio so fixated on creation that he forgets to eat. You will have recovered your power.



If you're ready to explore why losing weight has been so difficult for so long so that you can finally be free of your food addiction forever, this book is for you.

## How Does the Book Work?

Once I began to explore the question of powerlessness as related to weight, I realized that powerlessness over the urge to eat was simply a superficial layer of powerlessness. It actually covered up for five other ways that people felt powerless in their lives. People feel powerless when they doubt themselves, when they feel frustrated, when they feel vulnerable or unsafe, when they feel rebellious or angry, and when they feel empty. I call these five areas the *five layers of powerlessness*, which we'll explore throughout this book. As you explore each of these layers, you'll delve more deeply into your psyche and develop a more mature and clear view of who you are and who you are becoming.

When a person crosses over the line between food as a source of life and food as a source of comfort, all these layers compound one another and food becomes a psychological thing instead of a biological necessity. People can usually identify when in their lives this happened. Perhaps it was during a difficult transition: a divorce, a move, or a change of schools. But whenever it happened, they have perpetuated the pattern and they can't see their way out. This book will help you peel away the layers and finally be free of this pattern.

In this first part of the book, you'll learn about these five layers and how they've been specifically affecting your life. Then, in part two, you'll have sessions that, similar to being in a private session with me or participating in my twelve-week program, will provide you with the necessary exercises to have you arrive at the insights and understanding you need to achieve real change.

Together we'll peel away the layers as you go on the *Shrink Yourself* journey, and I'll work with you through the exercises in this book to free the real you hiding inside your body.

We'll look at why, after so many efforts to be free of an addiction to food, you're still at a place where you feel utterly defeated. Together we'll begin again—this time with a renewed sense of hope and my expertise and partnership. As you strip away each of the layers of powerlessness, your dependence on food will diminish until your powerful self finally emerges.



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PART ONE

# The Learning Sessions



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# 1

## Emotional Eating 101

I've been on a constant diet for the last two decades. I've lost a total of 789 pounds. By all accounts, I should be hanging from a charm bracelet.—*Erma Bombeck*

Take any moment in time, focus the camera lens on your neighborhood, and look closely. You'll find dozens of people—maybe even hundreds or thousands—breaking their diets no matter when you check. Every one of those well-intentioned dieters woke up in the morning determined to stick to an eating plan, but by afternoon had one hand on a piece of chocolate and the other on their forehead, wondering why, why on earth they had no willpower. In fact, you might be one of those people.

It's no secret that extra pounds can shorten your life. Studies show that up to 83 percent of diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease can be prevented by proper diet and exercise. Obesity can diminish your energy level, interfere with social success, and even reduce earnings, as a recent study that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* showed. The study measured overall wealth at age thirty-nine

for 2,000 people who had been followed since adolescence. Those with a normal weight had twice as much accumulated wealth.

So why can't you reach your weight goals, knowing these things?

As I said in the Introduction, you have installed food as a psychological coping mechanism in addition to being a source of nutrition.

My patient Allison recently told me, "My dependence on food started as a preteen. If I came home sad, my mother told me, 'Eat, it'll make you feel better.' I didn't have weight problems very early on in life but I was pushed to eat, eat. As a teenager, food became my friend.

"One day when I was sixteen, I found out that my boyfriend had cheated on me with this bitchy girl, Linda. I remember crying on the couch and my mom making me a huge ice cream sundae and spoon-feeding it to me. And yes, if you can believe it, I still want ice cream now whenever I feel blue. When my divorce from Tad became final last month, I went right out to Cold Stone Creamery. I know I eat to avoid emotions."

Using food to deal with emotions as Linda did is called *emotional eating*. A study I conducted of 17,000 failed dieters showed that virtually all of them relapsed because of emotional issues, mostly related to self-esteem or emotional hurt. They were doing really well on their diets, and then their husband started having an affair, or they lost their job, or a parent got sick. Perhaps you had a similar kind of thing trip up your diet efforts in the past.

One thing I've learned is that attacking emotional hunger by counting calories is almost like trying to run a marathon while lying on your couch. It just doesn't make any sense. You need to go deep within to control emotional hunger, because as real as the hunger feels, it originates in your mind, not in your belly.

Roxy, a forty-five-year-old mother of three, reported that she ate a whole box of donuts after a frustrating afternoon at the mall with her sixteen-year-old daughter. She said to me, "I was so mad at her, what else could I do?" This very intelligent woman couldn't think of even one other option, in spite of my prompting and questioning.

Her pattern of stuffing down feelings by stuffing in food was so deeply ingrained in her mind that it short-circuited her common sense. Roxy had lost her ability to think clearly and constructively about a charged emotional issue, another indication of emotional eating. She didn't need a box of donuts to satisfy her physical hunger, but she thought she did. She thought donuts were the only way to dial down her anger and frustration and to rid herself of angry thoughts toward her daughter.

Roxy and Allison have a few things in common.

1. They overate to suppress feelings.
2. They chose comfort food (not broccoli) and felt guilty about it.
3. They short-circuited their best problem-solving abilities.

These three behaviors describe emotional eating in a nutshell.

Let's start with a simple quiz to determine if you are in fact an emotional eater, someone who uses food to cope with life.

## Are You an Emotional Eater?

To find out if you're an emotional eater, answer the following seven questions.

The last time you ate too much:

1. Did you notice your hunger coming on fast, or did it grow gradually?
2. When you got hungry, did you feel an almost desperate need to eat something right away?
3. When you ate, did you pay attention to what went in your mouth, or did you just stuff it in?
4. When you got hungry, would any nutritious food have sufficed, or did you need a certain type of food or treat to satisfy yourself?



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