

Chapter 6 **The Obvious Question**

It’s a curious thing when a huge population adopts a disease-promoting way of life, sees the danger, agonizes over it at length, then continues to do it anyway. If you look to our origins, the explanation becomes clear.

Why We Keep Eating Destructively

The reality for most of humanity—as for most animal life on Earth—has always been the struggle to find enough food to survive. We were here long before there were cities and suburbs, factory farms and supermarkets. In an undeveloped environment, food insecurity is the norm and you had better exploit every opportunity for eating that you get since you never know what’s coming next, if anything.

The drive to eat whatever you can, whenever you can, makes perfect sense when there’s not enough food available. Bring that same drive into a setting where high-calorie food is constantly available, and you can begin to see the problem.

Our dilemma is intensified by the fact that so much of our food supply is now organized around the flavors of sugar, salt, and fat, present in processed foods at concentrations much higher than anything that can be found in nature. This has not occurred by accident, of course. Those flavors are the foundation of our processed foods simply because we like them so much. As a successful species taking control of its food supply, it is predictable that we would skew our food toward the flavors that we prefer.

It’s likely that we have those particular preferences because, in conditions of food insecurity, they promote survival. The desire for sugar and fat lead us to the higher-calorie food sources that are critical when you need to make sure you are getting enough to support life. The taste for sugar also leads us toward the essential nutrients found in fruits. Sodium is generally available at low levels in whole foods, fitting nicely with the fact that trace quantities of it are essential to life.¹ If we

tend toward saltier-tasting foods in the wild, it guarantees that we'll get the minimal amount of sodium that we need.

The problem is that our abundant supply of manufactured food confronts us with sugar, salt and fat in quantities and intensities that bear no resemblance to anything we could find in an undeveloped environment. We are biologically unprepared for dealing with this level of availability, so most of us will predictably lose control of our eating when consuming foods based on these flavors.²

We've done it to ourselves, unfortunately. It is a primary drive to secure as much food as possible, so we naturally engineered our lives to create maximum food security. With food now readily available to most of us at all times, we have to manage the drive for food acquisition very intentionally; we have to choose to stop eating even though there is still food available.

This choice is new, and doesn't come naturally to most of us because it's a skill we might never need in the wild. It's a recent requirement of modern life, and based on the overwhelming prevalence of eating and weight problems in our country, most of us have not adapted to this new challenge. If you feel like you are eating without brakes, that may not be far from the truth.

Why We Avoid Exercise When We Know Better

Life in the wild can be something of a grind. Every basic need we have—food, water, shelter, safety—requires work. Sometimes it's a lot of work, and it's required almost every day.

You need to conserve energy as much as possible to assure that you have it when necessary for acquiring food, fending off or evading predators, and keeping up with the basic maintenance tasks of life. You don't have to be motivated to move in such circumstances because you have no choice but to move quite a lot—if you don't, you die. *There's* your motivation.

Obviously then, another goal we had in creating a more comfortable life was to reduce the level of brute force effort it requires. We've therefore been busily engineering away the dangerous, tedious, exhausting work of our lives. After millennia of having to keep working no matter how tired you get, it's nice to be able to rest when you want to.

As it turns out, however, we've been too successful for our own good. We are physiologically adapted to survival in the untamed world we so recently left behind. Our bodies are optimized for regular movement and work, as evidenced by the fact that they require it for good health. Take

away too much of the physicality of life, and health slowly begins to decline.

Here again in modern life, we have unwittingly created the need for a choice we are not wired to make: to move on purpose for its own sake, rather than because we have to. After millennia of seeking rest opportunities whenever possible and having that work quite well for our survival as a species, we now find ourselves having to choose the opposite. Small wonder most of us are so resistant to the idea.

The Critical Inversion

The elements above combine in a disastrous way. Consider two aspects of our lives:

- One occurs only in certain places and at certain times, with the expectation of specific limits.
- The other occurs almost anywhere, almost any time.

The first used to describe how we eat and the second used to describe our physical activity, but that has changed. It used to be movement that was fully integrated into most of our waking hours, but now it's eating.

For most of humanity across the ages, life has involved a little eating and a lot of activity; there was simply no other choice. In less than one human lifetime, we've inverted the ratio. We've done this because, having the capacity to manipulate our world, we prioritized and innovated based on our instinctual drives. Well, of course we did. What else would we ever do?

Unfortunately for us, we've been able to transcend some boundaries we actually needed. The act of building around our drives drastically reduced the natural limitations (scarce food, life requiring a lot of work) that once kept those drives in check. The results speak for themselves.