

**Interview with Elizabeth Babcock, LCSW**  
Author of *Why We Overeat and How to Stop*

**Thousands of books have already been written about weight loss. What could possibly be left to say?**

Most people initially assume that this book is about weight loss. That's not actually the case, but it is true that the principles of the book are critical to achieving and maintaining a healthier weight for life. It's really about understanding why we sometimes feel so helpless to control our eating and what we can do to end the struggle inside.

Weight control is important, but it isn't the point of the book. The point is to be able to eat on our own terms—to be able to eat how and when we *choose* to rather than because we simply can't stop ourselves. Until we achieve that, the battle with weight can never be won anyway. Once we do achieve it, food becomes more gratifying than it's ever been, plus we get the stable weight and health we've wanted all along.

**What prompted you to write your book?**

Because I spent decades in the grip of compulsive eating myself, I've always wondered how it worked. How could I possibly have been drawn so powerfully to behavior that most often left me feeling physically ill and emotionally devastated? It made no sense, yet I'd been unable to stop myself.

When I first found my way out of it I got very good at understanding what worked, but not *why* it worked. In recent years, I found myself drawn more and more to the study of basic brain science and in late 2014, the puzzle pieces suddenly clicked together, forming a picture that finally made sense of it all.

I'd been doing community education on this topic for a long time but this new information became far too much to share within the limitations of an evening seminar, or even a series of them, so I knew I had to change my medium. I felt an urgent need to share it with as many people as possible, and a book was the only logical way to do it.

**You say you struggled with overeating for many years. What was your eating like?**

Oh my, it was bad. It started around age six and from there on through my teens I just gravitated more and more toward junk food, especially sugary stuff and bread. I lived on snack cakes through my adolescence, often skipping legitimate meals in an ill-advised attempt to limit my calorie intake somehow. Once I got out on my own in early adulthood, it got even worse because I was no longer living with anyone who cooked real food and I wasn't that inclined toward doing it for myself.

Whole days sometimes went by in which I ate mostly cake batter, cookie dough, or frosting, followed later by as much fresh-baked bread (remember bread machines?) as I could eat. During my "better" periods, I also ate a lot of salad, but not for the nutritional value. I was simply attempting to be full of something else so that I wouldn't have as much room for the junky stuff that seemed to be controlling my life. Most of what I ate was of no value to my body, and a lot of it was actually harmful. It wasn't that I couldn't get quality food, but that I chose so little of it. To this day, I am amazed and profoundly grateful that I am not diabetic.

I spent 37 years of my life absolutely hooked on junk food. By the time I got into my early 40s, I'd long since given up hope. After all that time, I had no expectation that it could ever be any different and had fully resigned myself to living the rest of my life that way. Therefore, it came as a total shock when I found my way out. It was amazing to realize that I could finally be free. I couldn't have been happier if I'd hit the lottery for millions of dollars.

### **When was that, and what has it been like for you since?**

That was in 2001 and I've never looked back. It's not like the urges have disappeared forever, but it's pretty easy for me most of the time now because, over the years, I've learned to set it up that way. There are still times, though, when I'm hanging on by my fingernails, like holiday and other celebrations which tend to be so focused on food. Fortunately, I'm able to make sure that those times don't happen too often or last too long because they are miserable experiences when they do happen. It's always a great relief to get back to my normal way of life, where I can just relax and enjoy food without fear of hurting myself with it.

It has been crystal clear to me since 2001 that no matter how much I still sometimes feel a strong pull toward food, I know that I'm a lot happier with the way I eat now. I like not hating myself. I like being able to feel like a sane person when I'm around food. I like not having that awful fight going on in my head all the time. I don't miss any of that, and I don't want it back. Nothing I ate back then was worth it—I only did it for as long as I did because I couldn't stop.

Even after all this time, every free day feels like a miracle to me. I don't think I'll ever take this for granted. I never imagined that it could be like this and I know many other people can't imagine it either. People need to know that this is possible, and it's my mission now to share this information as widely as I can.

### **So what is it, really, that you do differently now?**

First, here's what I *don't* do anymore. I don't count calories or grams. I don't measure food. I don't diet. I don't restrict. I don't do anything that leaves me feeling resentful or deprived. I don't go hungry. I don't weigh myself more than a few times a year, which is noteworthy because I used to hop on the scale all day long; in my particular case, that was a significant part of the craziness. I actually had to destroy my bathroom scale because I couldn't resist it if it was still around.

When I started this, I already owned many calorie guides and I knew a *lot* of those numbers by heart. I had come to realize that I needed to focus on my body's cues rather than on calorie guides and scale readings, so I hoped I'd be able to get those numbers out of my head. It took years, but I managed it. I'm hard-pressed to tell you the number of calories in anything at this point and I have no idea how many calories I consume in an average day. I'll take note of calorie counts when I'm comparing labels between similar items but once I've made a choice, that's not a piece of information I try to retain. Not everyone will want to adopt this part of my approach, but I'll offer the reassurance that calorie counts were unavailable for most of human history and our ancestors did okay. Their great advantage was a lack of access to modern foods. When your diet consists of whole foods because that's all there is, you really don't need to count calories. There's a lesson there that we can put to good use in how we choose food now.

I also don't keep any food in my home that causes me to struggle with maintaining control. None. If I can't handle it, it's not in my space because I don't want to have to work at self-control when I could be relaxing and enjoying my life instead. That's probably the most important single change I've made: setting up my life to keep myself out of harm's way as much as possible when it comes to food. If I'm not being triggered, then I don't have a problem and I don't have to work at anything.

I make sure I have everything I want that I can enjoy without losing control. I plan ahead to make sure that I always have lots of easy, safe options so that my attention doesn't have to start wandering toward choices I'd later regret. That's really my only limitation—I strive to avoid eating in any way that would cause me to feel badly later, whether physically or emotionally. My hit rate is certainly not 100% but I find that if I maintain a consistent effort, my hit rate is sufficient to keep me feeling happy with food, my body, and myself.

I've described a number of my personal strategies in the book, just for the sake of showing some examples of how it can work. I don't presume that what works for me will work for everyone but if my ideas give others a head start in developing their own, I'm happy to share.

**What would you say to someone who feels like they've tried everything, heard it all before, and are reluctant to pick up your book and risk being disappointed yet another time?**

I'd say that I really understand that feeling. I lived with it for a long time and I've heard it expressed by hundreds of clients over the years. It's an act of courage to try something new when you're afraid to hope anymore.

I'd want them to know that there is a clear explanation for this out-of-control eating that is ruining so many of our lives. I'd tell them that the situation is more workable than they'd guess and that working with it more effectively will give them greater personal wellbeing, stronger self-esteem, and much more enjoyment with food. Changes need to be made, but nothing of real value is ever lost. You get to dump the painful parts of your eating and get more enjoyment out of all the rest.

I'd tell them that it really is possible to be both happier *and* healthier, and that it's actually easier to live that way than what they're probably doing now. Happiness and health are not either/or propositions as many people seem to presume. Neither has to come at the expense of the other and, in fact, pursuing them together makes it possible for you to make the most of each.