



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

obesity, smoking, substance abuse: “looking for love in all the wrong places”

Where to start? These issues—obesity, smoking, and substance abuse—are so complex and each bears its own unique features. But, like the country song says, I believe they all stem from the same desire: for love, comfort, good feelings.

The bad news is that food, cigarettes, and drugs are all pale substitutes for what we really long for and their pleasure lasts for a moment while we can bear their consequences for a lifetime.

The good news is that what we are searching for actually lies within us, if we only have the courage, patience, and wisdom to sift through the chaff to find it. Each of us is a miracle, each of us has a purpose, each of us is capable of making a difference in the world and we are all connected. When we live out of that knowledge we know love and that “peace which passes all understanding.”

Finding a source of meaning in our life is one of the most important aspects of healing from our dependence on externals to make us happy. For some that meaning is clear and obvious, for others it takes much healing to find it. Often we must be willing to face great pain in order to work through old issues of loss, abandonment, shame, hurt, abuse, or trauma. As healing ensues, we learn to appreciate ourselves, to love ourselves and to begin to care for ourselves.

Learning new patterns of eating or giving up cigarettes or drugs is hard work. Each of us must find a plan that works for us. What follows are a few things that I believe are important to the process.

COMPASSION: No one wants to be overweight. We know the costs to our health and well-being. No one, after the initial “feeling cool” wants to smoke. It’s unhealthy, expensive, and socially isolating. No one wants to be addicted to drugs—for the health, economic, and legal consequences.

Too often people who have never struggled with such issues look with judgment on those who do. While everyone must in fact bear the responsibility for their actions, judgment of others or ourselves is of no help and in fact can send us into a spiral of feelings likely to lead to indulging in our substance of choice. The reasons people are overweight, smoke, or abuse drugs are myriad and changing those patterns requires heroic action.

All too often those struggling have no compassion for themselves. They identify with the societal judgments that they are weak, lazy, inferior. Having compassion for ourselves as we struggle to change is of utmost importance.

MOVING TOWARD SOMETHING POSITIVE: Change is hard, but it is easier when we are moving toward a positive goal: being able to accomplish some activity with comfort and ease, feeling healthier, saving money, feeling clear and proud of being able to face each day without help from substances. Change that comes from depriving ourselves because we are bad is doomed to failure.

LOVE YOURSELF: Love yourself, just as you are, and out of that love treat yourself as you would treat a beloved child: give yourself good food to eat, play, exercise, get enough sleep, spend time with people who love and support you.

START WITH SMALL GOALS: Plan for success by starting with goals that you know you can accomplish. When you are confident with those accomplishments, then move on to bigger things.

GET SUPPORT: Join a group—on-line or in person—gather friends around you, get a coach or a therapist.

FORGIVE YOURSELF: When the inevitable slip up comes, “pick yourself up, dust yourself off and start all over again.” I often use the analogy of a child learning to walk; no one yells at the toddler when they fall, they just offer a little comfort and support in trying again.

REMEMBER THE MIRACLE THAT YOU ARE: Our bodies are simply amazing. Take time to consider how we move, feel, hear and see. Think of our hearts, digestive tracts, nervous systems, lungs, muscles, and bones. With care and luck our bodies can keep us going for 70 years or more. Webster defines sacred as “regarded with great respect and reverence by a particular religion, group or individual.” What if we believed that our body was sacred? How would we stand? Move? Would it change the way we live? Would it change the way we treat each other?

For optimal health we must have a base that includes a sense of meaning and purpose in the world. Upon that foundation we add the traits of love, compassion, forgiveness, and gratitude; we develop a plan, starting small and gathering momentum. We get support from our friends and forgive ourselves when we slip up and then start again. ❧❧

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