# The Subliminal Messages of Dieting

What do you say to yourself about food, eating and your body? Is your inner dialogue helping you eat the way you would like to eat, or is it sabotaging you? If you kept a log of self-statements about foods issues, what patterns would emerge?

Over the years of working with people who are unhappy with their eating habits or with their weight, I have noticed certain thought patterns repeating themselves. These thoughts have an immense impact on what and how much you eat as well as on your sense of self.

Underlying messages about food and the body take hold in the far reaches of the mind. Human brains tend to simplify and generalize as statements settle in. What may begin as a somewhat reasonable statement filters into the subconscious mind as an insidious, negative idea. Here are a few examples that I have observed in my practice.

"I need to starve myself in order to lose weight." Not only is this statement a myth – you do not have to be chronically hungry to lose weight – it also is twisted to mean something far more sinister. This statement is typically translated internally to mean: "Not getting my needs met is good."

"Being fat is bad." While this may be true in some situations, it universally settles in the brain as the simpler, "I'm bad."

"I need a structured diet plan" works to undermine your ability to tune into natural signals of appetite and perpetuates this self-defeating concept: "I don't know what I need, someone else does."

"I can't lose weight." While this may be the truth (based on actual experience with dieting), people tend to interpret its meaning as "I am a failure."

"When I lose weight, I will…." Becomes "I am not entitled to have a life until I lose weight," which, at its most simple level, translates into this: "I am not entitled to have a life."

"Thin = health," which is one of society's most widely held myths, takes on various transformations. The most common one I see is: "I cannot be healthy if I am not thin," and, therefore, "there is no point in taking care of my body until it is thin." This message is further edited to mean "there is no point in taking care of my body at all" and "my body does not deserve respect," until it is finally distilled to this horrific statement: "I don't deserve respect."

"Certain foods are bad."  This statement implies that "if I like these foods, I am bad."  This message reinforces the sense that "I am a bad person."

Getting out from the mental quicksand of these self-defeating thought patterns takes work.  A good place to begin is with awareness.  Practice by spending a few days listening carefully to the food, eating and body statements of those around you.  Particularly notice the "moral" words (i.e. good/bad or right/wrong) and the absolutes such as "have to" and "should."

Another step you can take is to search for statements that will lead to affirmation and support rather than self-negation.  For example, take the statement that begins, "when I lose weight, I will…"  What are you putting on hold until you are at a weight you are happy with?  Make a list of things you are not doing.  Then take a good look at this list.  Is it really necessary to wait?  Start doing one of the things on your list and see how that feels.  By going ahead and doing more of the activities you enjoy, you are living a message that you deserve a fulfilling life.

When it comes to the process of eating, look at how you make food choices.  Do you often choose based on the good/bad perspective on foods?  When you eat the foods you have labeled as bad, you end up with the self-label of a bad person.  And since beating yourself up does not lead to behavior change, you end up in a frustrating cycle.

To break this cycle, try looking at food choices from an internal perspective instead of from a judgment-oriented, external perspective.  The next time you have an appetite, ask yourself, what do I feel like eating?  What would hit the spot?  Play around with various choices by imagining the food in your stomach and asking: "Will this do it for me?  Does it need to be hot or cold, bland or spicy, smooth or crunchy?"  After eating, evaluate the food based on how well it hit the spot rather than whether it fit into some rule that you or someone else set.

Eating what you really want reinforces a message that you deserve to get your needs met and that you are a worthy person.  Many people also discover that in the long run they eat less when choosing foods this way.