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USING MENTAL IMAGERY TO CONQUER OVEREATING

By Robert Jager

Introduction.

The following article gives an outline of the techniques I used to rid myself of the compulsion to overeat. It is followed by some theoretical explanation as to why I think the approach was successful.

Overeating

The desire to eat unnecessarily has little to do with genuine hunger. It is usually a conditioned response that is activated by a number of factors. The three main factors that set off the response are: the presence of outside stimuli that suggest eating, the need to change unpleasant emotional states, comfort food", and genuine eating situations that get out of hand. I will discuss the outside stimuli first.

I can recall sitting in front of the television, happily engrossed in a show, when a food advertisement came on. Within a very short time I would experience a strong desire to eat something, anything. The same thing happened whenever I visited a coffee shop. I would go in intending only to have a cup of coffee. But the presence of those delicious cakes and sweets would set off the craving in me to eat food that I usually didn't need. Like most, I simply blamed the food for causing the craving and left it at that.

When the time came to do something about my ever-increasing weight I knew that it would be an absolute waste of time and energy for me to go on yet another diet or exercise program. I know from experience that these approaches require more will-power than I can muster to make them work over the long term. I suspected that if I could do something about getting rid of the desire to eat unnecessarily I would stand a much better chance of success. These are the steps I took to do this.

When we are presented with an object or event that sets off desires in us, the mind forms a mental image of what is "out there." To this image, a meaning is assigned from our memories.

The emotional response we are then subjected to will be created and defined by the type of meaning we assign to the perception of the objects or events.

In the case of the cakes and sweets in the coffee shop, the meaning assigned to the mental image of them will not be a simple definition. It will contain memories of the pleasant experience we had the last time we ate such goodies. It is these desirable qualities that we assign to the perception of the cakes that cause our craving. It is not just the presence of the food. The cognitive processes we perform in our heads are what trigger the craving.

Because this whole process occurs within us we can do something about it.

Ways for dealing with food cravings

When a sports coach tries to help you perform better he will often get you to visualize yourself executing the desired action perfectly. The theory is, if you recall this visualization the next time you play, you will be guided by the practiced, successful image rather than your usual, less successful images.

My Question then was this - If we can use this technique to program new ideas into the mind, why can't we reverse it and remove existing negative or undesirable ideas from the mind?

The answer is - We Can!

I began by forming mental images of foods that had the power set off my craving for them. Then, in exactly the opposite way to that recommended by sports coaches and the like, I withdrew my projection of meaning to the image and then dismissed it from my mind. It helped when I could establish a "space" between "me" and the image before dismissing it. When I became proficient at the technique, I found I could form mental images of food that I had previously found irresistible, and then withdraw my involvement from them before dismissing them from my mind and allowing me to become "emotionally neutral" in regard to that food. I was then able to frequent coffee shops, have a cup of coffee, and feel little desire to eat the tempting treats on offer.

Encouraged by my success, I shifted my attention to so-called "comfort food." I am quite sure that eating for emotional comfort is an attempt to exchange the unpleasant emotional states associated with thoughts of loneliness, boredom, frustration and the like, with the pleasant feelings that accompany eating. When we experience these unpleasant states our minds will automatically seek a solution that will return us to emotional equilibrium. If eating has been used before for this purpose, then this is the image or perception that will be presented to the mind as a remedy for present states of tension or stress. When this comfort eating perception has been validated by the assignment of meaning, the emotional response of feeling like eating automatically "kicks in."

I developed visualizations to represent these underlying thought processes that must be occurring before I felt the need for "comfort food." I pictured myself going to the refrigerator, taking out the food and eating it. When this visualization was clearly formed, I withdrew my involvement from it and dismissed it from my mind in the way outlined previously. As with the desire to eat that seemed to be caused by external factors, there was a marked reduction in

the urge to eat in these situations. This allowed me to refrain from eating and seek other solutions for my emotional state.

The same approach was effective for removing my desire to overeat at mealtimes. We become conditioned to expect a particular amount of food with each meal. Any attempt to limit ourselves to less is usually futile because we are left feeling unsatisfied. Invariably, the difference is made up at the next eating opportunity.

I learned to "see" myself sitting down to my usual excessive meal and then I practiced "pulling back" from that image before discarding it from my mind. I soon experienced a marked reduction in the urge to eat in my habitual manner. This allowed me to make sensible moderate meal choices and stop eating when my real need for food had been satisfied, something I had been unable to do previously. This was a wonderful outcome for a person who had been totally unable to resist the urge to eat extravagant amounts of food when it was available.

This reduction in food intake resulted in a significant weight loss. Over a 5 month period, without ever going on a diet and with a minimum of exercise I lost 50 lbs, which represented 28% of my former bodyweight. This was a very satisfying outcome but cannot compare with the feeling of empowerment I received from regaining control over a part of my life that previously been beyond my ability to manage.

Discussion

Nobody was more surprised than me that the techniques I developed worked. They permitted me to totally rid myself of the desire and compulsion to overeat. Here are my thoughts on why the approach was successful

It is generally accepted that the human mind forms mental representations or images of the external world from sensory input . I will refer to these images as perceptions. We can regard this process as inescapable. Whenever the sensory receptors in the form of eyes, ears nose etc are in working order, the mind must form a perception of what is "out there."

We have been taught through years of schooling and training to attach meanings to these perceptions once they are formed. This training process began in infancy when we learned the words for various objects, and continued in primary school when we were shown marks on the blackboard and told "this written word means this." The next time the mind received the same sensory input and formed the same perception we knew which meaning to attach to it.

In time, the attachment or assignment of meaning is followed by an emotional response, especially when the perception relates to something we apply significant values to. For many this is their experience of reality. A perception is formed from sensory input, a meaning is assigned from memory and an emotional response is generated. Now we come to the problem.

The assignment of meaning to the perception has become so automatic that we are no longer aware that we are doing it. We have become so unmindful of this cognitive process that we ourselves initiate that we now regard the meaning we assign to the perception as being

contained within the perception itself. We now look upon the perception and the meaning as being "fused" into one. And this has very unfortunate consequences for us. Every time the external environment forces the mind to form a perception we are subjected to the emotional experience that is linked to that perception whether we desire it or not. This is because the perception and meaning are seen as one, and just getting the mind to form the perception is enough to create the emotional response as well.

This is of course the reason why outside events appear to have the power to control us. The external environment can compel the mind to form a perception of it from sensory input. But the emotional response is generated through the assignment of meaning by the person who has the perception. And because this assignment of meaning is now totally automatic, it seems that the external world has the power to force our response as well, when in fact it can only cause the mind to form a perception. "They/It made me" is an opening line that describes this process only too well.

What this means in everyday terms is that when we decide to change something in our lives we are undermined by this automatic cognitive process. We try to avoid or modify certain behaviors only to be presented with familiar stimuli that cause the mind to form perceptions to which we automatically assign meanings, and generate emotional responses that urge us to behave in our familiar or habitual manner. [What we are doing with the visualization is to act differently from our usual habits while all the time feeling habitual urges to do what we are used to doing.]

What must be done to achieve lasting change in our responses and behavior is [to] retrain the mind from automatically assigning meaning to perception it forms. We can become selective about which thoughts we "make real" and thereby produce an emotional response. This allows us to become emotionally neutral in areas where we previously felt compelled to behave in a particular manner. Then we are more able to make more considered and rational choices about how we shall act.

The task of retraining the mind from automatically assigning meaning to the perceptions it forms is made much simpler when we can look upon the mind as being composed of two distinct and separate parts. The main part of the mind contains all the things we associate with ourselves, including self-awareness, memory and ability to think. It is where we exist as individual entities. It could, for convenience, be referred to as "the me" or "the you."

The second part of the mind can be labeled the reactive or conscious mind. It should be seen as the "go-between" mind. It operates in images only and it is in this part of the mind that the images of the outside world are formed from sensory input. And these are the images or perceptions to which we assign meanings to create an emotional response. Whenever this process remains unchecked we will be the victims of emotional experiences that seem to be caused by sources beyond our control.

The second source of images that appear in the conscious mind is from our thoughts. When we direct our thinking in a particular direction, images of what we are thinking about will be formed in the conscious mind. For example, when the directive to "think about your mother" is given, whether you were aware of it or not, an image of what you associate with the term "mother" was formed in your conscious mind. (Interestingly, the direction to not think about your mother will produce the same result.)

As with the perceptions formed from sensory input, we can regard this process to be inescapable. Think about something and your conscious mind must form a representation of what you are thinking about. When this has happened, the cognitive process is exactly the same as for images formed from sensory input. A meaning is assigned and an emotional experience or response generated. The assignment of meaning to these images has become totally automatic as well, locking us into our familiar emotional responses when we think about a particular topic.

The first step we must take in interrupting this previously automatic process of assignment of meaning is to visualize the images appearing in the conscious mind. We can learn to “see” them forming in much the same way the images on the television or movie screen appear. Next, we must withdraw our conscious involvement or projection of meaning from the image. It helps when we can create a “space” in our minds between the image and ourselves before we dismiss the perception from the mind altogether.

In time, with plenty of practice, we can retrain the mind from assigning meaning to every perception that is formed in the conscious mind. This has the effect of greatly reducing and ultimately extinguishing the emotional drives that are generated by that perception. Then we are able to choose new behaviors with some assurance they will endure because we are not being continually compelled emotionally to act in our familiar way.

Summary

One of the greatest obstacles to behavioral change is that we still feel like acting as we did before. The moment we relax our efforts we revert to our old ways because it feels natural and comfortable, even reassuring, to do so. I found that the techniques outlined in this article removed much of the compulsion to act in accordance with my familiar ways behavior. This allowed me to make something like rational choices in areas where previously I had felt compelled to act in [a] habitual manner. It also greatly reduced the emotional agony that usually accompanies attempts at behavioral change, allowing me to make significant alterations to my behavior in areas where I had been unable to do so previously.

See also review of Robert Jager's book, *The Hunger Master: Weight Management Program* (Second Edition), Sandy Bay, Tasmania, Australia 2000 www.hungermaster.com

Robert (Rob) Jager was born in 1950 in Tasmania, Australia. He worked for twenty years in alcohol rehabilitation and became disillusioned with the methods on offer. In his opinion they offered little in the way of tangible procedures for the clients to follow. Faced with the need to get his overeating under control, Rob. developed the HungerMaster Weight Management Program, which utilizes mental visualization exercises to remove the need to overeat. Rob. currently conducts information sessions and workshops to teach his techniques.

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