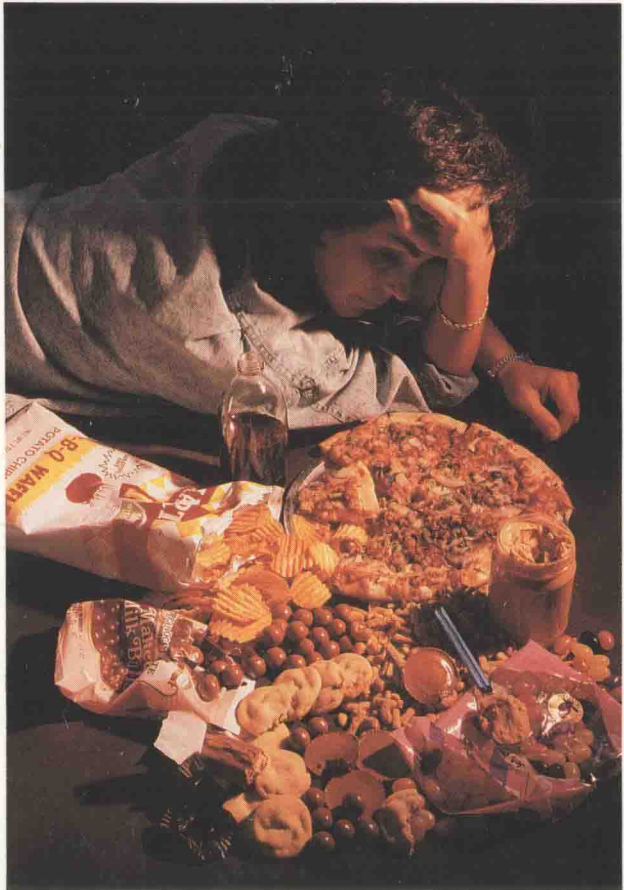


# A Substance Called Food

**How to Understand, Control and  
Recover From Addictive Eating**

Second Edition



Gloria  
Arenson



# **A Substance Called Food**

**How to Understand, Control and  
Recover From Addictive Eating**

Second Edition

**McGraw-Hill**

**New York San Francisco Washington, D.C. Auckland Bogotá  
Caracas Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City Milan  
Montreal New Delhi San Juan Singapore  
Sydney Tokyo Toronto**

In the case histories cited, the author has used fictitious names and described traits not identifiable to any particular person unless that person has given express permission.

© 1989 by **Gloria Arenson**.

Published by The McGraw-Hill Companies.

First edition published 1984 by Rawson Associates, N.Y.

Printed in the United States of America. All rights reserved. The publisher takes no responsibility for the use of any of the materials or methods described in this book, nor for the products thereof.

All rights reserved. No part of this book shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without permission from the publisher. While every precaution has been taken in the preparation of this book, the publisher and author assume no responsibility for errors or omissions. Neither is any liability assumed for damages resulting from the use of the information contained herein.

pbk 11 12 13 14 15 16 QWF / QWF 0 7 6 5 4 3 2

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Arenson, Gloria.

A substance called food : how to understand, control, and recover from addictive eating / by Gloria Arenson. — 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Rev. ed. of: Binge eating, 1st ed. c1984.

ISBN 0-8306-3430-4

1. Eating disorders—Popular works. I. Arenson, Gloria. Binge eating. II. Title.

RC552.E18A74 1989

616.85'26—dc20

89-20402

CIP

Acquisitions Editor: Kimberly Tabor

Development Editor: Lee Marvin Joiner, Ph.D.

Cover Photograph: Susan Riley, Harrisonburg, Va.

**FOR BROCK**

**my partner and friend,  
who has always known the  
Truth about me  
and inspired me to live it**

**"The life which is unexamined  
is not worth living."**

**PLATO**

**BOOKS BY GLORIA ARENSON**

*How to Stop Playing the Weighting Game*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**T**his book could not have been written without the help of the many wonderful people who have taken my classes and workshops and those who have shared their hopes and fears in individual counseling sessions. Special thanks are in order for the men and women who allowed me to use their words and experiences to help others still suffering.

Thank you my dear friends and colleagues Laurence T. Brockway, M.A., Eleanor Livingston, M.A., and Helen Powell, M.A., who have eagerly exchanged ideas with me and have been available for professional and personal support. In addition, I am grateful to Solomon Perlo, M.D., and Gretchen Newmark, M.A., for their valuable expertise.

I am happy to have had the assistance of Vickie Myers, Sarah Koolsbergen, and especially Bette Kramer in typing this manuscript and Sharon Zulauf, whose editing skills kept me to the point.

# Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vi
<b>I: FOOD ADDICTION: A PROBLEM FOR MILLIONS</b>	<b>1</b>
1. <i>I Had to Write This Book</i>	3
2. <i>Causes of Addictive Eating</i>	19
3. <i>Who Binge Eats?</i>	33
4. <i>What Is a Binge?</i>	53
5. <i>Medical Dangers of Eating Disorders</i>	81
<b>II: THE WORLD OF THE FOOD ABUSER</b>	<b>95</b>
6. <i>A Lifetime of Struggle: Diets Don't Work</i>	97
7. <i>Core Issues of Food Addicts</i>	115
<b>III: A SELF-HELP PROGRAM FOR CHANGE</b>	<b>135</b>
8. <i>The Four-Level Plan: An Overview</i>	137
9. <i>Changing What You Do</i>	151
10. <i>Changing How You Feel</i>	173
11. <i>Changing How You Think</i>	193
12. <i>Retrieving Your Power</i>	219
<b>IV: FOOD FOR THOUGHT</b>	<b>249</b>
13. <i>How Psychotherapy Can Help</i>	251
14. <i>Advice to Family and Friends</i>	261
<b>APPENDIX - STOP ADDICTIVE EATING!</b>	
The 4-Level Plan	277
<b>SUGGESTED READINGS</b>	<b>279</b>
<b>INDEX</b>	<b>281</b>

*Food Addiction:  
A Problem For  
Millions*





## *I HAD TO WRITE THIS BOOK*

**I** have never met a woman who liked her body. Every woman I have ever known will go on at great length about her inadequacies: fat thighs, thick ankles, too small or too large a bust, small eyes, long chin, or fat earlobes. Women who are a size 20 dream of being a size 12; yet those who are a size 12 yearn to be an 8. No one seems to be satisfied, and this is the nature of the game. To chase the carrot of "someday I'll be perfect and then my dreams will come true" is what I call the weighting game.

As a psychotherapist and teacher I have dealt with thousands of women (anorectics, bulimics, and compulsive overeaters) who believe that if they change their appearance—get thinner—all their problems will be solved. They blame their unhappy relationships or lack of relationships on the premise that they are not slim enough to

attract the right man or get the right job. Looking good equates with having a good life. It just isn't so!

Recently, I tried to remember a time in my life when I felt totally OK. When was it that I lived every day as it came, without feeling inadequate or worried about my future? When did my self-consciousness start? For me, it began at age twelve. Up until that time I *had* a body. After that I *was* my body. From then on, I was never at ease in the world. I had a handicap—my body—a body that would never be tall enough, slim enough, or flat-chested enough. Other women I know recall feeling unhappy about their bodies as young as three or four years of age.

Along with millions of other women, I have spent my life buying books and magazines that tell me how to improve. I have been obsessed with food, gone to doctors, clubs, self-help classes. All this energy was focused on hiding the not-OK feelings. After all these years, the magazines are still running the same articles, the books are rehashing the same ideas, and there are even more weight control businesses than ever before. Women are feeling more pressured and more frenzied in their efforts to achieve perfection that will lead to love and all the "happily ever after" dreams they cling to.

Five hundred million dollars are spent annually on diet products in the United States. We as a nation are obsessed with thinness. Recent studies have shown that 60 percent of girls aged ten to thirteen have dieted at least once. The emphasis on weight has created a monstrous situation with the result that one in one hundred teenagers suffers from anorexia nervosa; and bulimia is epidemic. After a twenty-year apprenticeship of going on diets, trying shots, pills, and fads, I discovered Overeaters Anonymous. I was

desperate. It was a relief to hear that I had a disease and couldn't help myself. But I was told that I could arrest my disease one day at a time by following a twelve-step program. I decided that I had nothing to lose but my compulsion, so I stayed for eight years.

During those eight years I did not have one cookie, one scoop of ice cream, or one slice of cake!! I quit sweets cold turkey and adhered to the rigid low-carbohydrate eating plan that was given to me when I joined. Those years were full of pain and full of joy. By giving up my sugar "fix," I had nothing to turn to in order to put aside the stresses and anxieties of my life. I had to face my feelings for the first time and acknowledge my problems. I had to live life without a crutch of food—and it hurt.

To survive this ordeal, I had to learn how to cope with my problems and to change or resolve the issues that were most difficult to live with. In other words, I had to become an adult. The twelve steps of the Alcoholics Anonymous program adopted by OA taught me skills and problem-solving techniques. The only way to stay away from compulsive overeating was to practice the principles of this new program for living. It was like throwing a child who doesn't swim into the water. You either learn fast or sink.

Overeaters Anonymous is different from all other weight clubs in that it is more than a diet. The group borrowed the Alcoholics Anonymous program for recovery that maintains that compulsive eating is a threefold problem: physical, emotional, and spiritual. In all the years I attended OA, I saw many miraculous changes. They occurred when the individual did more than diet—when he or she lived the program for change.

## *I: Food Addiction: A Problem for Millions*

Food abusers, like alcoholics, can be either "dry" or "sober." Being "dry" means that you are on a diet; you are imposing a temporary program for eating that will eliminate emotional binges as long as you stay "good." Being "dry" means that you are behaving a different way with food but are not doing anything to understand how your feelings or your life stresses contribute to compulsive overeating habits.

Sobriety is different. Being "sober" is a state of physical and emotional wellness. Sober people have given up bingeing and have learned or are learning to understand what issues in their lives cause them to eat (or drink). They then work to change these attitudes and unhappy situations.

One of the positive aspects of belonging to any weight club or support group is that you can get approval and love *right now*. You don't have to get thin or stay thin to be successful as a human being. After eight years in OA, I realized that I accepted all the members I met whether they were fat or thin. They didn't have to lose weight to please me. They were already lovable.

I saw that an important stumbling block for OA members was the belief that their problem was insoluble. As long as you believe that you are a victim of compulsive overeating, you are not in charge of your life. At any moment, the ax may fall and you go on a binge, not knowing why or how to stop.

After eight years in OA, I no longer believed I was powerless over food. I knew damned well I had the power, but I didn't know how to use it consistently. I decided to find another solution. I was tired of living my life being

doomed to have an eating problem forever. I longed to be "normal."

After twenty years of diets and eight years of total abstinence from certain high-calorie foods, I was terrified at the thought that I could eat just one portion and stop. The belief that I was an all-or-nothing person who had no control over certain foods had been with me for a long time. I was doubtful that I, a college graduate with a master's degree, could ever be free of my obsession with food.

Looking back at those years when going without ice cream and dessert was no struggle, I tried to find out how I was able to maintain the restricted food intake so easily. I decided that during my years of participation in OA, all my needs were met. I received the love, approval, and help from my fellow members that I hadn't received in my life up until then but had yearned for. I had friends on call day and night. I didn't need food to take the place of loving feelings because I was getting the "real thing."

I discovered that to eliminate compulsive overeating, the problem eater must live a life of fulfillment. That means finding out which of her needs aren't being met and either getting them met or changing the situation and finding a better life. It means finding a specific lifestyle of consciousness, courage, and willingness to go forward, no matter what is necessary. The food addict must exchange martyrdom, victimhood, and pain for autonomy and power. I decided to share my experience with others, and I began by teaching classes based on the idea that self-esteem was the key to creating a better life. If a person felt good about herself and her life was happier, she would be more

## *I: Food Addiction: A Problem for Millions*

motivated to diet and be less inclined to eat because of stressful experiences.

Then I came across a concept that seemed to explain why so many diets had failed for so many people. Elizabeth Keyes in her book *How to Win the Losing Fight* put forth an idea called the "art of gentle eating." It was a precursor to behavior modification and was designed to help the binge eater learn to stop being afraid of food, stop depriving herself of favorite foods, and become responsible for eating what she wanted and stopping when satisfied. Along with this eating program was a set of ideas and meditations to increase self-acceptance and raise self-esteem.

Elizabeth Keyes's ideas encouraged me to teach people how to be free of the bondage of food. After all, the problem is not in the food but in the overeater. The more the food abuser blames food, the more she relinquishes her power to change her life. Although this program was exciting and offered a life free of dieting, I was amazed at how resistant people were to incorporate these concepts into their lives. How wonderful it would be to give up dieting forever! Why wasn't it easy to do?

Women who suffer from eating disorders are dedicated to the idea that the goal is to have a perfect body as soon as possible. The body must be pummeled, prodded, punished, and denied to give it the correct appearance. To seek freedom from compulsion is too long a process for most people. It takes hard work; you must look into yourself, and you must change. Very few people want to do that. They prefer the fantasy of a temporary diet that promises they will live happily ever after.

## 1: I HAD TO WRITE THIS BOOK

The nondiet approach was very popular and attracted many people. My students lost weight and seemed to enjoy the process. I evolved a system called "integral behavior modification" that went beyond the "art of gentle eating." I became aware of the ways compulsive eaters stopped themselves from reaching their goal. I called the point at which a dieter stops working and starts to regain her weight the "resistance point." I knew all the rationalizations for eating and cheating. Now I wanted to understand *why* so many women had to sabotage themselves at the "resistance point."

Some people stopped themselves halfway to their goal; others ran out of steam five pounds from success. Many binge eaters have a "magic number," a weight they never seem to go below. Each time they reach the "magic number," the diet goes out the window and they return to compulsive overeating and regain all the pounds they have lost. One day it dawned on me that the magic number symbolized the demarcation line between maintaining the status quo and the need for dramatic change in a person's life. The "magic number" is a fantasy. The dieter believes that something major will have to change in her life if she achieves her goal. That something may be overcoming fears of intimacy with men, talking back to an authority figure, quitting a job, disagreeing with a significant other, or getting a divorce. When you go below the "magic number," you have permission to be or do what you have wished but feared to do. Often the fear wins out, and the binger retreats to a safer place. The "resistance point" is the place at which fear surfaces.

Many dieters work hard to lose weight but know ahead of time at what weight they will run into trouble. I remem-



## *I: Food Addiction: A Problem for Millions*

ber a young woman who had a paralyzing fear that something terrible might happen to her father. She feared that if she lost weight, she would become attractive to men and have to marry. Then she would have to leave home and would be unavailable if her father got sick or had an accident.

Another overweight woman kept herself from achieving her goal because she believed that she would have to confront her husband and ask for improvement in their relationship. She felt inadequate as an overweight person and thought she couldn't get anyone better. As long as she was too heavy, it was fine for her to settle for less. But if she looked prettier, she would have the right to a more satisfying marriage. If she demanded more, her husband might leave. She was more afraid of being alone than she was brave, so she stayed fat to avoid putting her self-worth to the test.

My private practice as a psychotherapist grew as I helped women work to learn what fat symbolized in their lives. Fat was not the problem, but it was a good cover-up for the real issues of fear of loss of love, relationship problems, guilt, poor self-concept, and nonassertiveness. And I found that although most overeaters wanted desperately to overcome the food compulsion, they really didn't want to change. The idea of things being different, of having to learn to ask for what they wanted, of having to go to work and support themselves, of moving away from the dependence on parents or spouse was too frightening for many.

In 1978 I wrote *How to Stop Playing the Weighting Game*, a workbook designed to help dieters and compulsive overeaters stop dieting and be free of their obsession with