

"This tastes so good. Why stop? Have some more."

"How dare you waste food?! Don't throw it out... eat it!"

"I want to eat, whatever I want to eat, and nobody can stop me."

Sound familiar? How about these?

"What is wrong with you? Why can't you eat like a normal person?"

"I have been bad last night. Starting today, I'll be good, eat right and exercise every day."

THE INNER EATERS SYSTEM: *Identifying Natural Weight through Balancing the Parts of the Personality that are Involved in Eating*

by Yolanda Koumidou-Vlesmas

Do you recognize any of these voices? Do you have others? These are some of our inner eaters, the parts in one's personality that eat without awareness; these parts prevent us from reaching and maintaining "natural weight."

What is natural weight and how is it determined? Natural weight is a state in which one feels comfortable about one's body image. One knows he or she has arrived at this state because there is no daily struggle in maintaining this weight. One reaches natural weight by reading and following the body's signals when eating. The challenge lies in deciphering WHO (which part of the person) can sense and translate those signals. When the body is fed more than it needs, WHO in the person does the overfeeding and why? In other words, WHO is really eating the food?

The development of the Inner Eaters System was initially influenced by my personal story of yo-yo dieting combined with three decades of experience as a psychotherapist and work in the substance abuse field. It was further enriched by the process of individuals participating in a program I have developed called Dieting Know More. Another major source of inspiration has been the theory of the internationally renowned psychologists and authors Drs. Hal and Sidra Stone called the *Psychology of the Aware Ego and the Selves*.

The Inner Eaters System is composed of sub-personalities or inner selves in our psyches that are involved exclusively with food and eating. One group of inner selves uses food as a tool for psychological comfort, protection, pleasure, or stress release instead of for its nutritional value. These inner selves misuse food by either over- or under-eating. This group is called the Inner Comfort Eater Selves (ICES). When the ICES take over, the experience of food and eating brings pure ecstasy and/or total escape followed by severe self-criticism.

People who develop the ICES as a dominant part of their personality view food as having a multipurpose, the least of which is feeding the body. Often they act in highly specialized ways, associating certain groups of food with specific emotional needs. When the ICES take control of eating decisions, they resist the rules set by other selves pertaining to the time, place, or manner of eating.

Usually people identify and name their own group of ICES. For example, an individual might have "The Secret Eater", a self who eats in secrecy whenever nobody else is around. The same individual might have also developed "The Filling-the-Void Eater", a self who comes in whenever he or she is bored or lonely.

The main gift that the ICES bring is the protection they offer from any hurtful, overwhelming, and unpleasant emotions. They protect by blurring these emotions through eating. They act as first responders and are constantly on call. This group of inner eaters takes care of vulnerability that a person may be unwilling or unable to handle directly.

This article was found at: www.voicedialogue.org. Please visit us for more articles and other resources.

The ICES are limited by the fact that they have no connection to the body, especially to the stomach and taste buds. When the ICES are active, one eats whether or not one is hungry and continues to eat after the stomach is full. There is no tasting of the food; instead, a person will eat large quantities of food very quickly. One of the most serious limitations, is how the ICES bring on inner critical attacks. These inner critical voices enter after a meal or first thing in the morning. When one tries on clothes in department stores, steps on a scale, or looks in the mirror, he or she suffers attacks severe enough to cause depression. In an effort to deal with the depression, a person will eat more, thus creating an unending, vicious cycle.

Conversely, another group of selves uses food only for its nutritional value. These selves are known as the Nutrition In-Tune Eater Selves (NITES). When the NITES take control, one treats eating as a strict and serious regimen, categorizes food as either good or bad, defines right and wrong portions, and recognizes correct or incorrect food combinations at all times. For example, one might have developed “The Healthy Eater,” a self who eats only what is considered healthy and rarely buys any products without reading the labels. For another individual, “The Weight Watchers Eater” might have become dominant in his or her personality. This is a self who equates food with points and who carefully counts every time he or she eats.

One of the NITES’ benefits is that they place food in perspective, and their main function is to enable a person to lose weight. This is done by following external cues, usually through prescribed diet plans and programs. NITES are well educated about the nutritional aspects of food as well as different types of exercise and are extremely concerned with the individual’s health. This group has strict rules, and following these rules can bring concrete results. Identifying with the NITES might very well be the only way for an individual to reach a natural weight, thus maintaining one’s health and saving one’s life.

One of this group’s limitations is that it does not allow for any flexibility in eating. Its rules resemble army commands that sometimes exclude a person from eating entire food groups. NITES are constantly mindful of when, how much, and what one should eat as well as how frequent and intense an exercise regimen should be. They often require the person to measure food, to specify how many meals should be eaten daily, and at what times during the day one should eat them. This consumes a significant amount of energy and removes the natural joy and pleasure that eating can provide. The NITES have no connection to the body because a person is forced to follow external cues at all times, at any cost.

When either the ICES or the NITES become dominant in one’s personality, the body’s natural rhythms go unnoticed, the taste buds’ needs go unmet, and the stomach’s signals remain undetected. Therefore, the cues as to when to begin and when to stop eating are dictated by inner selves rather than by the body’s physiological needs.

When one becomes available for a transformational shift, the two groups of inner eaters are integrated and the body’s signals regarding eating are consistently taken into consideration. This process is called Body In-Tune Eating (BITE). One is ready for such a change when one gets tired of yo-yo dieting

and becomes determined to end the struggle with eating once and for all. As one begins to use Body In-Tune Eating, one is able to enjoy and find pleasure in food, making healthy nutritional choices while staying connected with and tuning in to the body's signals. One reaches this state by learning to identify, understand, and befriend their inner eater selves.

One way of getting to know one's inner eater selves is through the Voice Dialogue method developed by Drs. Hal and Sidra Stone based on the theory of the Psychology of the Aware Ego and the Selves. Voice Dialogue is a transformational tool with which one dialogues with the different parts or selves residing in the psyche for clarification and understanding of their function in one's life.

When utilized with the Inner Eaters System, the goal of Voice Dialogue facilitations is to empower one to separate from his or her dominant inner eaters and to embrace the less dominant or disowned eaters on the opposite side. Through this process the two sides are integrated, promoting more choice and balance in one's eating patterns. Vulnerability that used to be buried by the inner eaters gradually surfaces and is handled with awareness from a new "middle place" in one's personality the Stones call the Aware Ego Process.

Following is a Voice Dialogue facilitation with Dina. (The name has been changed to honor anonymity.) We dialogued with one of her NITES she called "Healthy Choices Eater" and with one of her ICES she named "Rebellious Eater".

Her "Rebellious Eater" was born when she was 9 years old. Dina was the youngest of four. The only family member paying attention to her, making her feel safe and included was her older sister who was 12 years older than Dina. When Dina was 9, her sister moved out. Dina felt lost, abandoned and unsafe. She started using food to deal with her feelings. She over fed herself and gained weight. The kids in school started making fun of her and she felt humiliated. The more she felt humiliated, the more she ate. The more weight she gained, the more they would make fun of her and so on. That is when her "Rebellious Eater" was born. During our Voice Dialogue facilitation I asked Dina to move on one side so I can speak to this self. This is what the self had to say:

THE REBELLIOUS EATER

"I am angry. I am rebellious and angry. I bite my nose to spite my face.

I don't have any rules about food. Anything goes. I use food and I abuse food.

She gets to have what she wants with no rules. I can do whatever I want.

If I want to go to McDonalds, I go to McDonalds.

I am never satisfied. I want to have everything. I say, 'I want something sweet and salty and thats what I do'

There are no choices. No picking one or the other because I can have everything.

I am angry because of judgements people put on me so what, what my body looks like I say 'Too bad for you. I can get fat if I want. Too bad if you don't like it.'

I give her a hard shell because if someone hurts your feelings you say, 'I don't care', but you really do but they don't know it.

I protect her hurt feelings.

She got picked on a lot in school. She was hurt. Then I will come in almost like a bully and sooth her with food. I will say to her, 'Have some cookies.'

I can always nurture her with food. No matter how sad, angry or lonely she feels. If she is alone I comfort her with food and that is why I give her all those choices. She can have anything she wants.

It is like saying, 'I am OK even if somebody thinks I am not OK'.

She always felt inferior when she was overweight. People made fun of her and she was taken advantage of. I despise when she is submissive.

When you are overweight you are submissive to somebody who is not overweight.

When I am around she feels strong. She doesn't have to feel all that hurt."

The "Healthy Choices Eater" was born in Dina's late 20s after the end of a love affair. At the time, she was so devastated and furious that the only way to punish the ex-boyfriend, she thought, was through losing weight to make him regret what he left. That's when the "Healthy Choices Eater" came in. She lost 33 lbs, kept it off for a year, but then ended up putting it back on. During the same facilitation I asked Dina to move to the other side and this is what the "Healthy Choices Eater" had to say:

THE HEALTHY CHOICES EATER

"I have many rules. First and foremost, you have to have a balanced diet. You have to eat all good, healthy foods. Exercise.

Drink lots of water.

Meditate.

I am the one who knows you have to live and food is part of life. It is normal to enjoy food but without the guilt. I know it is OK to have a piece of cake and not lose your mind. Even though my mind knows you have to enjoy food yet when I hear someone saying,

'You can have a piece of cake' it raises anxiety that gets me terrified that I might lose control to the food.

I know it is rational to enjoy the food, but I get afraid that once she tastes that she will knock me right out of the way. I rather have her stick to the healthy choices. Even if I say it is normal to have a piece of cake now and then, someone else does not know that and she takes it as a green light to go with it without stopping."

When she moved back to the middle, in the Aware Ego Process, she was able to discern the gifts and limitations of this pair of opposites. She identified how the "Rebellious Eater" is a hard shelled protector shielding her from hurt, sadness and loneliness. While in this self, she feels strong and ready to take on the world. At the same time, however, she recognized that since this self places no limitations or restrictions around food it causes binge eating and weight gain leading to self-loathing and depression.

Conversely, the "Healthy Choices Eater" takes care of her need to have self-control, enjoy a state of well-being while enabling her to lose weight and feel attractive. This self takes good care of her, the way a mother takes care of her child. However, the "Healthy Choices Eater" can be quite restricting. Dina experienced this self as regimented and boring, never allowing her to indulge in anything.

Through Voice Dialogue facilitations Dina separated from her "Rebellious

Eater” and began embracing her “Healthy Choices Eater” enabling her to lose and keep off the weight. Gradually, the underlying feelings of abandonment she experienced as a child began to surface, and she slowly learned to handle them from this new place in her personality; the Aware Ego. In the beginning as her vulnerability appeared from under the inner eaters, it was new and quite scary for her. With time and more Voice Dialogue facilitations, she has been strengthening her ability to soothe and comfort past and present feelings of loss and abandonment. Operating from the Aware Ego, she is holding the tension between the ICES and NITES, controlling their tendency to “rush to her rescue” through the only way they know how: over- or restricted-eating.

These days, when the inner eaters come in, she recognizes them faster, dialogues with them, calming their concern about her safety thus preventing them from taking over for long periods of time. She is learning to utilize their gifts, integrating them in her life. For example, when she puts on unwanted pounds, she is aware that an Inner Comfort Eater Self has been present. She looks for situations in her life where she has neglected herself, not taken care of her needs or ignored her feelings. In this way, this eater serves as an alarm system, making her pay attention to the state of her emotional life. When she decides to lose those extra pounds, she is learning to bring in the “Healthy Choices Eater” with awareness to guide her to lose the weight. Through this ongoing process of vigilance, self-responsibility and aware action, she is able to maintain her natural weight and attend better to her vulnerability.

When one discovers his or hers own inner eater selves and begins to read the body’s physiological signals, one is empowered to make choices about eating without regrets. When the ICES and NITES stop dominating how, when, and what to eat, one can reach and maintain natural weight and minimize self-criticism regarding body image. When engaging in Body In-Tune Eating, one reaps the benefits of both types of inner eaters as they become integrated and vulnerability can be handled directly in a more conscious way. When the Inner Eaters System is balanced, one has a chance to break free from the powerful and self-destructive attachment to eating while developing a natural and pleasurable relationship with food.

© Yolanda Koumidou-Vlesmas, 2008



Yolanda Koumidou-Vlesmas, LCSW, BCD, CASAC, CHt, is a psychotherapist in New York with three decades of national and international clientele. She is the creator of Dieting Know More, a four-level program for natural weight maintainance. Ms. Koumidou-Vlesmas is a Senior Voice Dialogue Facilitator and Teacher that studied and worked directly with Drs. Hal and Sidra Stone for many years. The Executive Director of the Koumidou Center, LLC, Yolanda develops and leads retreats, workshops and training in self-empowerment throughout the United States, Europe and Australia.

516.568.0306 | koumidou@optonline.net

www.dietingknowmore.com | www.koumidoucenter.com