Brief Report

Making Friends with the Food Nazi

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Abstract

Many people struggle with dieting. This article provides an Internal Family Systems approach to overcoming behaviors that feel out of control, specifically compulsive eating. The three "parts" discussed by Internal Family Systems therapists, Managers, Exiles, and Firefighters, are briefly described. Self-talk is assessed and different ways of adapting that self-talk is presented, while making friends with your parts is highlighted.

When I was young I could eat anything and not gain an ounce. When I grew older, that was no longer the case. However society influenced me and I seem to equate "thin" with "sexy, attractive, and desirable". Over the years I dieted using all the tricks imaginable. I usually only had to lose 20 pounds, but I found that whenever I tried to diet, there was an internal part of me resisting. The more often I tried and failed, the stronger that part of me became. I came to call this part of me the "food nazi". Now I only had to allow the word "diet" into my head and the "food nazi" went to work, often causing me to gain weight, seemingly overnight. Finally, it was my blood pressure and cholesterol level that forced me to confront the fact that I needed a change. If I could successfully raise three kids as a single parent while getting several counseling licenses and my Ph.D., I ought to be able to loose weight, right?

My first step was to join Weight Watchers because they don't say the word "diet". I immediately became fearful because I could hear the "food nazi" gearing up for battle. It was saying things like, "You really need some gummy bears to keep in the car when you are driving because they taste really good, have no fat, and will keep you from being hungry so you won't eat as much." It was using diet talk but the result was that I would still be eating gummy bears, which actually increases my hunger rather than allaying it.

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Another example occurred in my conversation in my head as I was writing down what I ate. "Food nazi" was saying, "those few extra scrapes of butter don't have to count, heap the cup up and you can have a little more cereal for breakfast." It stunned me because I realized I was the only one who cared if I lost weight, and I was trying to hide the extra crumbs from myself.

At this time I was reading a little about Internal Family Systems (IFS) for a class that I was teaching. The IFS model has elements of two already existing therapy paradigms, systems thinking and the multiplicity and internal complexity of the mind (Schwartz, 2002). My own preferred counseling theory incorporates elements of Structural Family Therapy, Object Relations Therapy, and Spirituality. What I was reading resonated with my beliefs. IFS identifies and addresses the "parts" of you that form your internal family system which directs and influences what you think, say, and do. I wanted to send the "food nazi" packing, so I thought I would look in there for a "food ninja" that could defeat my "food nazi". Upon further study, and conversation with a Marriage and Family Therapy peer, I discovered that it is important for me to make friends with my parts and try to figure out what purpose or tasks they are performing for my well being. I figured that I wouldn't win if I tried to attack and banish the part because it was a necessary part of my internal well-being.

There are three common roles for parts: Managers, Exiles, and Firefighters.

Managers are the parts that try to keep me safe and functional. They work to control both the inner and outer environment so that I won't be hurt (Breunlin, Schwartz, & Mac Kune-Karrer, 2001).

Exiles carry the memories of all the painful traumas I have experienced in my lifetime. In an effort to keep these emotions, memories and sensations of humiliation, hurt, shame, loss, or fear from overshadowing my mind, the manager tries to keep these vulnerable and needy parts locked up in closets (Breunlin, *et al.*, 2001).

Now the *Firefighter* comes in. When my exiles are triggered and upset, my emotions threaten to flood and overwhelm me, so the firefighters come in to rectify the situation. They often act irrationally and impulsively but their job is to provide protection by overriding or dissociating me from the exiles feelings (Breunlin, *et al*., 2001).

I decided my "food nazi" was one of these firefighters, so I decided to make friends with my "food nazi" and see what happened. First, I realized that part of me didn't like the name "food nazi" because it was so pejorative and after all, it was a part of me. I thought about what that part was trying to accomplish for me. It was very concerned that I have pleasure and happiness in life. I had worked hard for years and sacrificed a lot of pleasure in my role as "forever student" and "single mother". After this internal conversation, I decided to rename the part "satisfier/gratifier (S/G) and thanked the part for taking care of my pleasures, and wondered if we could work on other ways to give me pleasure instead of eating. The most remarkable thing about the conversation was that the fear of dieting was replaced with a realistic idea of sacrifice that I found acceptable. I was no longer fearful that sabotage would wreck my attempt.

My internal conversation has now changed. Instead of fudging (no, my mind isn't on food much) in the direction of eating a little bit extra that I don't count, I hear my S/G say things like, "That doesn't taste as good as I thought, and even though I counted it for my meal points, I don't have to eat it all. The satisfaction is in stopping because I can. I don't have to employ trickery to find pleasure. If I go out and want very much to eat something, my S/G says, "Go ahead, we will count up the points, get back on track tomorrow. If you only eat half, you can eat the rest tomorrow, and that would be twice as good."

Conclusion

So, will I lose weight? I hope so. I want to be healthy. I exercise and find ways of scheduling that exercise as often as possible. The relief I feel comes from the loss of fear that I will sabotage myself, and that there is something that can defeat me when I set a reasonable goal for myself. I try not to carry on that internal conversation out loud so people will not think I am nuts. (Whoops there I go again). The discovery of IFS has opened a new way of looking at my internal conversation. As I become aware of the exiles in my life, I can bring those losses and hurts to light so that they can heal. As I gently expose the exiles, the firefighters no longer need to become activated. Hidden "parts", when exposed, become integrated with my true knowing self and I become more in touch with the soul I meet in the center of my being.

References

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