

# Overeating: Stagnation as a Metap

by Frances Turner

In April 2007, over a year ago now, I stopped eating sugar. Sugar for me had been a major addiction since childhood. Although I've always known it's bad for me, somewhere inside myself, I thought it did all sorts of comforting things. It was satisfying, stopped me feeling too much, gave me energy, helped if I was bored or upset, made me feel stable. The urge to satisfy my need for comfort and stability always trumped any health worries – after all, I was quite healthy wasn't I?

The key for me in knocking this addiction on the head was in realising that it did absolutely nothing for me. I started to think about how we all lie to ourselves about our addictions, whether they be sugar, chocolate, caffeine, cocaine, alcohol, cannabis, medical drugs, nicotine or heroine. We say to ourselves it is comforting, it gives me strength, it gives me satisfaction, it stops my stress, it helps me sleep, it gives me confidence, it gives me energy, it stops my emotions, it makes me feel stable.

But this is a Giant Lie. We lie to ourselves, and the lie is supported by everything we see around us, especially on TV – beautiful slim women eating chocolate bars, strong virile men drinking beer, cool sexy dudes smoking cigarettes.

In fact, the drugs are doing the exact opposite. Sugar creates damp and heat, makes us fat and sluggish and gives us spots. Coffee, cocaine and uppers in general appear to give us energy but exhaust the *yang* and create pathological heat, fundamentally depleting our yin and yang energy. Many recreational drugs burn up the *yin* and create damp heat and susceptibility to blood infections, while cigarettes create a dry heat in the lungs that leads to *yin xu* and phlegm. Many of these drugs simultaneously suppress the appetite so the body is not getting the input of post heaven *jing* it needs, let alone absorbing it properly.

Most of us know this on some level, and believe that in the long term what we do is harmful. And yet, the brainwashing is so strong we will continue to do what we do because we believe in the short term gains. But in fact, there are no short term gains. If anything, there is only a brief temporary relief followed almost immediately by more craving. This is because the drug is causing the problems we are compulsively using it to fix. It is actually causing the lack of confidence, stress, sleeplessness, lack of energy, the feeling of insecure emptiness (Carr 1999).

For me, understanding this helped me to kick my sugar addiction. I managed to observe that when I overdosed on sugar, I didn't really feel satisfied but actually just felt horrible. The need to suppress my feelings was a major factor, and when I was completely honest with myself I saw that the sugar didn't really stop the feelings at all, it just temporarily made me feel so bad I had to put my attention on that. I would say that one key to my success was putting in place some support around allowing the feelings and dealing with them.

However, I had a second addiction. This one was less clear, more insidious. It was overeating. While I had managed to stop eating sugar, I had somehow transferred the addiction onto stuffing myself, particularly with carbohydrates (of course good organic wholemeal ones!). I was still living the belief that eating too much helped me to feel stable, and when I didn't overeat for a while I would still get this horrible unstable emotionally shaky feeling – a feeling as if I were falling into the void with no safety net.

I started to think about the difference between addictive poisons (which I could easily class sugar among) and overeating. Logically overeating is an addiction, so it must also be creating the problems it seems to promise to cure, but overeating is only food. I couldn't believe food could in itself create such instability. Was the void the price of not overeating? Was that feeling of a void unavoidable? I didn't fancy life at this cost.

Then I realised this is the dilemma for all addicts. Life seems not worth living without the addiction. And I suddenly saw the answer in terms of Chinese medicine. Yes, the overeating creates the feeling of a void, and how it does so seemed so simple it took my breath away.

If we overeat, the body cannot digest all the food properly and it hangs around as food stagnation, dampness and phlegm in the middle *jiao*. The damp stagnation obstructs the transformation and transportation of the spleen and stomach, and the body can no longer absorb nutrients efficiently, so the spleen and stomach fail to generate blood and fluids optimally.

Over time this causes a deficiency in the blood and fluids that we feel as an emptiness or void. There is literally nothing there. There is no yin support. Consequently we try to make more

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fluids and blood, but because the middle jiao mechanism is disrupted, instead of generating non-pathological fluids we create damp and phlegm, and instead of generating non-pathological blood, we create stasis (Yuen 2004, 2005).

I started overeating from stress very young, certainly by the start of secondary school age 11, which was an extremely stressful time for me. I used to buy a bar of chocolate at each of the three newsagents on the way home, and then gorge on Mother's Pride with lashings of butter and Marmite when I got home; all that before supper. I had no satisfactory emotional support at that time and this was my way of coping with the impossible. I am blessed with a fairly strong constitution, but my spleen never had a chance, and now I'm 46 the *jueyin* (blood and fluids) is shot to pieces. I hope not permanently.

Creating stagnation is a fall back safety position. We create stagnation to make ourselves feel safe. That's why we get qi stagnation when stressed – because we don't feel safe. And as the heart blood declines, and struggles to hold the *shen*, we get more and more anxious, and create more and more phlegm and blood stasis in a slightly misguided but nevertheless totally understandable attempt to generate and stabilise our *yin* and blood. This then further prevents the generation of non-pathological vital substances and the vicious cycle continues.

## About Frances Turner

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Fran is an experienced healer using acupuncture, massage, Chinese herbal medicine, healing and gentle movements as her healing tools.

Her background, however, is in music where she spent seventeen years working as a professional classical violinist. Fran co-ordinates and teaches on LCTA's Oriental Herbal Medicine programme and supervises in the Acupuncture and Herbal Medicine Teaching Clinics.



A friend of mine mentioned an aside from a well known Yogi she is studying with. He said, if you overeat, you might as well not study yoga. On a deep level, the same could be said for *qi gong* and *tai ji*, or indeed for receiving acupuncture. We spend our whole lives trying to free the flow of qi, blood and fluids, trying to help catalyse that for others, so that we can get balance and harmony into our lives. But what do we do to scupper the process on a daily basis?

The more I thought about this, the more I realised that addiction is a metaphysical problem. The more we try to hold onto things, the more we try to fix things, the more stagnation and stasis we generate. If I let go of my overeating, I am actually saying I allow my vital substances to flow freely. I allow myself to swim with the flow of life. There is nothing between me and the world. I am the world. There is a huge joy in the process of letting go into this space, and it is this joy that keeps peeping out at me, that is keeping me going.

I am currently in a period of withdrawal from overeating. Of course with food, there is no physical withdrawal in terms of symptoms, less even than with nicotine – there is just the empty insecure feeling. The question is, how long will it take for the *yin* and blood to start to regenerate to the point where the emptiness is no longer perceptible. But already it no longer bothers me. Just believing that it will eventually stabilise, and understanding in Chinese medicine terms how that must be the case, has been a revelation. ■

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