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PAINT-BY-NUMBER OR MASTERPIECE: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN RESTRICTIVE AND HEALTHY EATING

By Michelle May, M.D.

There is a harmful meme (like an idea gene) that has become so widespread, so ubiquitous, that it is accepted as normal. It has subtly integrated itself into our beliefs, our thoughts, our language, our behavior and our reality. It's so pervasive that it has become "conventional wisdom" and almost no one questions it.

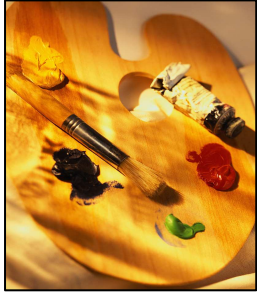
This meme is so insidious that most people who have it don't even realize it. Even the people responsible for spreading it don't recognize its potential for long term damage. In fact, most believe that they're actually helping others when they pass along this meme. They might even feel defensive or irritated when they read this article. Hopefully they'll keep reading anyway.

Have you been affected?

First, to see if you might have this meme too, take a look at each of the following statements and ask yourself if it is true for you some or most of the time. (To see if you might be a perpetuating this meme, ask yourself if you are intentionally or inadvertently teaching others these things.)

What's a meme? According to <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/meme> a meme is a unit of cultural information, such as a cultural practice or idea, that is transmitted verbally or by repeated action from one mind to another. Memes are the cultural counterpart of genes. According to Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meme>, like genes, some ideas will propagate less successfully and become extinct, while others will survive, spread, and, for better or for worse, mutate. Memeticists argue that the memes most beneficial to their hosts will not necessarily survive; rather, those memes that replicate the most effectively spread best, which allows for the possibility that successful memes may prove detrimental to their hosts.

- _____ I use labels to decide whether I can eat a particular food.
- _____ I weigh, measure or count just about everything I eat.
- _____ I usually pass up foods that are high in certain ingredients, like fat or carbs.
- _____ I avoid certain places or situations where there will be a lot of unhealthy food.
- _____ I sometimes just give in and eat bad foods but then make up for it by exercising more.
- _____ I answered yes to one or more of the above and I'm proud of my self-control.
- _____ I answered no to all the questions but I admire people that do and I believe that if I just had more willpower I'd be able to control my weight better.
- _____ I feel guilty when I eat certain foods.
- _____ I feel bad about myself when I eat foods I know I shouldn't.



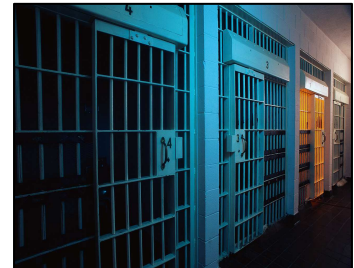
So what is this Meme?

A “yes” answer to any of the statements above may indicate that you have this meme. This meme is the belief that restrictive eating is healthy eating. It usually starts with information about nutrition or weight management that mutates into rules and restriction. But the blurring of the line between healthy eating and restrictive eating is the difference between a work of art and paint-by-number. Either way, you end up with a nice picture—until you get up close to take a look.

Healthy Eating vs. Restrictive Eating

In Charge	In Control
Nourishment	Diet
Fuel	Calories
Quality	Points
Healthy	Skinny
Aware	Preoccupied
Conscious	Consumed
Mindful	Vigilant
Information	Dogma
Guide	Rules
All foods fit	Good or bad
Balance	Perfection
Variety	Temptation
Moderation	Deprivation
Choosing	Earning
Deciding	Rationalizing
Flexible	Rigid
Hunger based	By the clock
Comfort	Portion sizes
Physical Activity	Penance
Introspective	Smug
Effortless	Willpower
Trust	Fear
Learning	Failing
Self-acceptance	Condemnation
Enjoyment	Guilt
Pleasure	Shame
Freedom	Bondage

The main reason that this meme is so powerful is that it has a built-in protective mechanism: the underlying belief that people who are overweight are incapable of handling freedom or choice. This belief ensures the survival of the meme because when you try to restrict yourself (or others) it actually leads to *more* cravings for the foods you’ve labeled “bad.” When you finally “give in,” you’re more likely to overeat, *proving* that you are incapable of handling freedom or choice leading to more restriction. (If you’ve already read *Am I Hungry?*, this is what causes Cycle Switching.)



One of the reasons that the meme is so successful at replicating itself is that it initially appears to be beneficial to its host. That's why so many people intentionally seek out this meme. The empires of Weight Watchers®, Jenny Craig® and NutriSystem® (to name just a few) were built on their ability to successfully transfer this meme to millions.

For many people that promote health, wellness and weight loss, “lifestyle change” and “healthy eating” have become euphemisms for “you’re going to be on this diet for the rest of your life.” I’m not being critical here; the meme is so subtle and so ingrained that they usually don’t even realize that restriction is at the core of their message.

How is this meme spread?

You are most prone to this meme if you’re overweight (or think you are). Everybody else that has the meme tries to give it to you in an effort to help you (or sell you something). It takes the form of rational suggestions, loving advice and even harsh criticism.

The meme spreads vertically through advertising, television, magazines, books, the Internet and medical research. It is propagated by marketers, models, celebrities, reporters, experts, bloggers, legislators and academicians. It is then spread horizontally from doctor to patient, dietitian to client, friend to friend, wife to husband and parent to child.

Even Oprah Winfrey, a woman I highly respect, transmits this meme to her viewers whenever she acts guilty for eating something “fattening” on national TV. (I’ve seen her do it on numerous occasions). Her example is especially powerful because she is held up as a model for what one can accomplish when they have this meme.

This meme is also swiftly moving from the United States to the rest of the world. European countries seeing an increase in obesity rates are now being inundated with the same restrictive messages we’ve been hearing for decades. The meme hasn’t helped Americans and it won’t help overseas. Mark my words, if they start dieting, French Women *Will* Get Fat.

Some people who spread the meme are carriers but don’t actually manifest it themselves. For instance, some health and fitness professionals eat instinctively *without* restriction but spread the meme when they put their patients or clients on a diet or rigid exercise regimen.

What pops into your mind when you look at this picture?

It’s just bread. But you’ve experienced the power of this meme if words like “carbs,” thoughts like “bad” and feelings like “fear” popped up. How did this happen? Atkins of course!

Innocent people who just wanted to lose some weight saw dramatic results when they cut out carbs so they told other people how easy and fast it was. The fact that it contradicted established nutrition recommendations fueled a media frenzy. Numerous experts fed the debate, drawing even more attention to it. Low-fat diets didn’t solve the obesity epidemic but maybe low-carb diets would.



The food and restaurant industry quickly jumped on board with a plethora of low-carb everything. Bread sales plummeted and sales of protein bars went through the roof. Never mind that most protein bars are the nutrition equivalent of a candy bar disguised in a confusing definition of “net carbs.”

Some doctors even tried Atkins themselves then recommended it to their patients. One physician pulled me aside at a medical meeting to proudly announce that he had lost seven pounds in the first week. He seemed disappointed when I told him that unless he had a 3500 calorie deficit everyday that week, it was probably mostly water.

Medical researchers also began studying low-carb diets. Nowadays, their research isn't just published in medical journals – they send out a press release to announce their findings in the lay press (which unfortunately is where some clinicians also get their nutrition education). In one such study (JAMA. 2007; 297:969-977), subjects on Atkins lost 4.7 pounds *in a year* while those on other diets lost between 1.6 and 2.2 pounds. Not very impressive but the headline in the popular press read “Low-Carb Diets Safe and Effective for Weight Loss,” giving the meme more legitimacy.

Of course the vast majority of people on Atkins gained their weight back (SURPRISE!) but by then it was too late. The meme had already integrated itself into our cultural beliefs. If you still think bread and pasta are bad and feel guilty when you eat them, you have the meme.

How to Get Rid of the Meme

Take a close look at the “picture of health” you’re painting. Is it constrained by rigid lines and someone else’s choice of colors? Or does it express your individuality, your preferences and your lifestyle? Choose now how you want to create *your* work of art. If you want to rid yourself of the “restrictive eating is healthy eating” meme, here are some specific steps you can take.

1. Expose the meme. Filter everything you read, hear and say by asking, “Is this restrictive in nature?” (You might be surprised when you start to notice just how pervasive it really is!)
2. Begin to monitor your little voice. (This meme is sneaky so it may be helpful to journal so you capture the real essence of your beliefs, thoughts, feelings and choices.) When you notice restrictive eating thoughts from the second column above, gently replace them with true healthy eating thoughts from the first column.
3. Remember, the meme may have you convinced that you are incapable of managing your weight without rigid rules. Find role models, health care providers and non-diet approaches that don’t propagate the meme. With time, support and new tools you *can* do it!
4. Use nutrition information as a tool not a weapon. Remember, all foods fit into a healthy diet.
5. Make the healthiest choice you can *without* feeling deprived. It is balance, variety and moderation.
6. Let go of the belief that you need to eat perfectly – that is the meme talking. Accept that you’ll sometimes regret certain choices you make – that is part of healthy eating. When you don’t get caught up in guilt and shame, you’re able to learn from your experiences.
7. Repeat often: It’s just food and I *can* learn to trust and nourish myself without restriction.

Hopefully it occurred to you that all of this applies to exercise too. In another issue, I’ll talk to you about the memes that can lead to overeating and how you can banish those.

For now, discover joy in creating your masterpiece!

Michelle May, M.D.

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