

Non-hunger eating: The Eating Blueprint approach, part 2



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About this series

This article is the second piece in a six-part series that outlines a number of strategies involved in the Eating Blueprint Starter Programme, designed to provide the psychological skills to support traditional weight management advice. It is a direct continuation of the comment in issue 3 of this journal (pages 100–2).

This article covers the next five of these strategies, again themed around the letter F. Nurses may wish to use some of these strategies in their time-limited consultations.

Fables

Fables are the stories, both spoken and unspoken, that we have in connection with food and eating. They may be the things we say to ourselves or words we hear from others in our lives, either from the past or in the here and now. Examples include:

- “It’s wrong to waste food.”
- “I must finish my plate.”
- “Eat your vegetables before having dessert.”

They may also be internal “rules” that we have accepted without question:

- “I have to eat if the clock says it’s a meal time.”
- “I have to bring back chocolates to work when I’ve been on holiday.”
- “I can’t say no when (mum/mother in law, etc.) offers me food.”
- “We always get a takeaway on Fridays.”
- “A meal isn’t finished without eating something sweet.”

Fables aren’t necessarily bad or wrong. Indeed, some fables have been valuable, particularly in times of rationing, for example. However, we may need to question how useful these fables are in the modern, food-abundant world, and create more helpful narratives that serve us better.

In the Eating Blueprint programme, there is a whole five-step process to help people uncover their fables and enquire into their usefulness, but to begin with we can invite them to ask themselves:

- “What are my fables around food?”
- “Are they always true?”
- “Are they always helpful?”
- “Are there any new fables I can experiment with today?”

Fullness

The feeling of a full stomach is very comforting. Often we feel that we need to eat in order to get this full stomach feeling, and so we keep

going beyond satisfying our hunger until we feel physically “filled up”.

When asked for reasons why they need to feel this way, people often give examples such as:

- *“There was never enough food growing up. Now I’m an adult I want to make sure I never feel hungry in that way again.”*
- *“I feel physically stronger when I have a full stomach. It’s as if I feel I can tackle problems more easily or other people can’t ‘get to me’ as much when I feel full.”*

When addressing non-hunger eating, I invite people to consider their personal story of feeling full and to ask whether it is serving them, and whether it is possible to experiment with something different. Remember, there is no right or wrong outcome; it is simply about seeing how it feels and doing more of what works and less of what does not.

Foresight

This topic concerns how we often get ourselves into certain predictable “situations” around food without using foresight to create an outcome that might support us better. For example, Christmas comes every year, yet we do pretty much the same thing every time: we think “Let’s just blow it” throughout the whole of December and spend January desperately trying to make up for it! Other examples include drinking too much on Saturday night and spending Sunday eating to cure the hangover, or buying that pack of biscuits every time we do the weekly shop.

This topic is all about developing the skill of foresight to know oneself, recognising these situations and trying to “learn from the predictability of life”. As with “Failure” in the last issue, this is another theme about which we can learn a lot about by thinking about the children

in our lives. When they do something out of the routine, whether it is starting their first day of school or meeting the neighbour's lively dog for the first time, we may well give them a little pep talk to help prepare them for this new experience. Why does this have to change once we're adults and are supposed to know it all?!

Therefore, I encourage people to develop their skills of foresight. They can start by identifying one "win" they could achieve in one of these predictable scenarios:

- This weekend, order at least one glass of water amidst the wine or beer on Saturday night.
- Resolve to buy those favourite biscuits every other shopping trip, rather than every time, and recognise that the world won't stop spinning if your "biscuit pleasure" is a little less frequent!

Fun

Often we eat because we just want some fun in our lives. Food can be a way of getting that fun – from the process of thinking and imagining what we want to eat and buying it, unwrapping it or preparing it, to the actual experience of eating it and the resulting feeling of being fabulously full. But, of course, if you're heavier than you'd like, there's often a downside too: guilt, self-criticism, disappointment, failure; the list goes on.

There are ways to get that all-important fun in one's life, so that food takes its rightful place as just one of many routes to pleasure or distraction. I encourage people to do just that: come up with a list of 10 things they could experiment with doing instead of eating. They can put the ideas in the notes section of their phone, list them in their diary or stick them on the fridge. Then, in the next few days, when their brain gives them the instruction to eat but they know that they're really craving fun, they can experiment with three things from the Fun List.

If they try three things from the list and the food is still calling, then they should eat. The Eating Blueprint does not aim to make it "wrong" to use food for fun. Sometimes, only the double-chocolate-chip muffin will do. However, the aim of this exercise is to establish that, although our brains might offer us the solution of eating, we don't always have to accept it without thinking.

Fear

Believe it or not, some people are bigger than they'd like to be because, deep down, they're scared of achieving the weight that always eludes them. Confused? This is a big and often emotive topic, though it will not be relevant for everyone.

In many cultures, there are a range of acceptable ways the media tells us we need to look in order to be attractive. Most "diets" reinforce this view and can lead us to feel ashamed or self-critical if we cannot reach this narrow view of what's acceptable. However for some of us, it can feel dangerous to look this way. We may not know how to deal with it, or we may feel threatened by sexual attention because of previous experiences that were negative or confusing.

This may sound a little Freudian (I am a psychologist, after all!). However, for some people, although their conscious mind says "Great!" any time they approach that desired weight, their unconscious mind may enter a panic zone. Suddenly, their portions get a little bit bigger, they start to say "This doesn't count" more often and they subtly self-sabotage their progress.

With this in mind, I encourage people to simply ask themselves if they have any "fear" around this issue. For many, there won't be, but for some, there will. They may want to think back to the time in their life, or the age they were at, when their weight loss difficulties started. What was going on in their life then? Did any of the following apply, for instance?

- Starting/ending a relationship/job/life role?
- Bereavement?
- Bullying?
- Abuse – physical, emotional or sexual?
- Inappropriate/unwanted sexual attention?
- Illness – either personal or in someone they were close to?

It is important to understand that there may be some deeply important reasons why a person is bigger than they would like to be. If particular triggers or associations with weight have been identified, the person may benefit from signposting to appropriate sources of support in the community, such as bereavement support, abuse support agencies, counselling services, Mind or Samaritans. ■

About the Eating Blueprint

The Eating Blueprint is a "psychological skills" approach to weight management, equipping individuals with a simple-to-use toolkit of strategies delivered within an online/video programme.

The Eating Blueprint method was created by Dr Jen Nash, Chartered Psychologist. A recovered emotional eater herself, Jen has spent the last 10 years immersed in the heart and mind of eating behaviour, unlocking the missing link of her own food-weight journey, and she now loves nothing more than to inspire others to find theirs.

The programme is available for NHS commissioning or, alternatively, the strategies in this article are available as a book and accompanying online Starter Programme for £12. To access or for further information, please email: hello@eatingblueprint.com

For a free information pack, register your name and email address at:

www.EatingBlueprint.com