



Counseling Someone With Food Addiction

Addiction in Christian circles is often viewed as the result of bad choices, and therefore, the person struggling can also choose to stop. In neuroscience, addiction is viewed as a brain disease due to the chemical interactions that occur within and changes in the brain functioning as a result of substance use. That's why a moral model of treating addictions that says, "Just quit and trust God," often falls short and fails to recognize a holistic view of the person, both body and spirit. Food addiction is similar and involves the interaction with brain chemicals and chemicals in food, in addition to the emotional and cognitive processes. Food basically triggers the same reward systems in the brain that drugs trigger. Unlike other addictions, however, navigating food addiction is a complicated process because unlike other substances, such as alcohol, we need food to survive and can't just "stop eating."

In simple terms, addiction is about pain relief, and all addictions are difficult to overcome without also treating the underlying heart issues in complete dependence and surrender to Christ.

Use these guidelines to identify food addiction:

- Person has developed tolerance or withdrawal symptoms
- Person has frequently consumed more substances than planned
- Person has taken excessive time acquiring, using or recovering from the effects of the substance
- Person continues to use despite difficulties
- Person has given up work, social, or family activities if they interfere with consuming
- Person has made multiple attempts to cut down on use of the substance

If the person experiences distress from three or more of the above criteria, they meet the criteria for food addiction, as distinguished from eating disorders and disordered eating. (These criteria are taken from the *DSM-5* for substance addiction.)

Walking with someone that has food addiction

Help them grow in self-awareness

When you identify that someone is struggling with food addiction, it makes sense to help them better understand the nature of their relationship with food. We want the client to gain insight into why the behavior is present. For this kind of internal processing, two key themes you want to help explore are:

- Avoidance of pain

Explore how the counselee is unconsciously turning to food as a way of not dealing with something instead of turning to God.

- Shame

Explore the counselee's inner narrative and the sense of shame that fuels their need to hide in food.


From a Gospel-centered Integrated Framework for Therapy (GIFT) approach, food would be explored as an idol or strategy that a person utilizes to numb from pain and shame instead of turning to God for comfort and the ultimate source of identity and fulfillment.

Be present with them in grief

Once people identify the current pains which trigger their addictive patterns, which is often tied to losses and/or childhood wounds, help them face and grieve them. Keep in mind that grieving will also include the coping strategies they've used to deal with these wounds and associated pain. Letting go will feel like a loss.

Empower them to turn to people and God

The Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) 12-Step program is a proven approach to help people with addictions. The power of the 12-Steps lies in the fellowship of recovering addicts and the experience of love, grace and acceptance lived out in the “rooms” of 12-Step meetings and in relationship with other recovering addicts. The avoidance tendency in those who struggle with addiction leads them also to hide and avoid vulnerability with people and God. As the GIFT helps them explore internal pain and grow in their ability to face and grieve them, it also empowers the person to turn from the unhelpful self-comforting strategy to doing life together in their relationship with Christ and others. And when they encounter the love and grace of Jesus in a community of believers who are all saved by grace, it makes it easier for them to continue to face hard things and be vulnerable in turn. Thus we should encourage



counselees to reach out for support outside of themselves and also endeavor to be a people and a community that provides a tangible experience of a loving and graceful God, the true source of recovery and healing.

Support them to restore their body and mind

Remember that food addiction affects the physical body, such as the person's hormones and chemical interactions in the brain. Therefore, abstinence for the food addict means to first detox the brain which includes removing trigger foods they crave. The chemical need for certain foods needs to be removed first or it is believed no other tools will help. This is hard work to do alone, so a 12-Step approach to recovery means attending 12 Step meetings, getting a sponsor, working the 12 Steps and abstaining from all trigger foods (**abstinence is for food addicts in particular, distinguished from other forms of eating disorders and disordered eating**). Finally, support your counselee in staying educated about the disease and keep them informed about resources for ongoing abstinence.