

Advice from the Trenches: Freshman 15



Dear Sister C;

Until I went to college, my weight was pretty normal, maybe a couple pounds over. This first semester, I've gained over 30 pounds. It's making me miserable and I've started hiding my room because I feel like a whale. I saw the school therapist and she was more concerned as to whether I was doing drugs. I don't even drink, so she said not to worry — a lot of people gain weight freshman year. She said I should like myself as I am and keep up my studies.

In the meantime, there are candy wrappers and Dorito bags all over the floor, and I don't have any friends.

Is it all in my head? Do I just need to accept myself and get out there?

Ms. Moby

Dear Moby;

I'm sure your school therapist is a perfectly nice lady with good intentions, but she's an idiot.

She's wrong on both counts — your weight gain IS something to worry about and you are, in fact, doing drugs. No, I'm not kidding. Allow me to explain.

Research from numerous studies have shown that high-fat/high-sugar foods stimulate the brain in the same way that drugs do. Sugar creates the same changes in the dopamine receptors as alcohol and other addictive drugs. In fact, lab rats found Oreos to be even more addictive than cocaine. This may explain why some people can't resist chocolate any more than a heroin addict can resist smack. It is also perhaps one of the reasons you are hiding in your room, surrounded by the equivalent of empty syringes. Sugar is your drug of choice — and it also really messing with your head. That moodiness, anxiety and depression? Sugar. You feel euphoric when your blood sugar goes up; you feel like dog waste when it drops. What will get it up again? More sugar. And if you try to quit cold turkey? Welcome to the worst headaches of your life and an urge to bite the heads off of bats.

Now, the weight gain. It's not about whether you think you look fat. It's about what that extra weight is doing to your health. If you were already a bit overweight, a weight gain of over 30 pounds has pushed

you into a dangerous new category: obesity. Weight to this extent is no longer a cosmetic or emotional issue. It becomes a health issue. Obesity is right up there with cigarette smoking when it comes to damaging habits. You are setting yourself up for a lifetime of problems. Once you gain a new fat cell, it never goes away. Dieting only makes those suckers shrink ... and they seem to eternally yearn to reinflate.

I understand that colleges are far more concerned about their students getting involved with drugs than they are with weight issues, but I find it deeply disturbing that licensed therapists are still pursuing the idea that weight is a "feminist" issue, or a matter of self-acceptance. One of the reasons that men die younger than women is because they don't make anywhere near the same effort to control the pounds and their diets are usually crap.

Listen, I don't care what you look like. I care about your personal sense of well-being. You are miserable. And you are not going to feel any less miserable if you stay in your room eating junk food and becoming a bipolar, self-loathing mess.

Here's what I suggest. Find a weight loss or support group on campus and join it. That sense of community is going to save you from the emptiness that drives freshmen to eat for comfort. It will surprise you how many other people are going through the same thing. Feeling isolated and exiled is half your problem. There's nothing wrong with you that isn't wrong with thousands of freshman all over the world. You are away from home for the first time, haven't found your place yet, and you feel out of it.

A clue — a lot of the people who seem like they are having a fabulous social life are really good actors, or drunk ... sometimes both. Appearances are deceiving. When I worked with a psychiatrist, he had many slender, pretty young patients who thought they were grotesque. In fact, the more attractive the girl, the more insecure they seemed about their looks.

Weight and sugar addiction are health problems; your self-esteem is another issue. If you replace the junk with real food you will be surprised at the way your food cravings go away. Real food is not addictive. Have you ever had to restrain yourself from binging on steamed broccoli or lean meat? You will also be surprised at how much more stable your moods are and how much more you like yourself. When you stop struggling with addictive foods, you can finally get on with your life.