

## **THE SCARS OF CHILDHOOD CAN ADD UP TO A LOT OF WEIGHT**

Excerpted from: WINNING THE LOSING BATTLE by Eda J. Leshan.

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Some years ago, a psychotherapist who was trying to help me explore my early recollections of being a fat child suggested that I try to recall some actual experience and write it as a story. The following was the result.

They had been making fun of her; they called her fatty and they laughed, because she fell down while trying to skate. They were three tall boys and the two prettiest girls in the fifth-grade class. Walking home from school, miserable, full of shame, she stopped in the candy store where they sold the Italian Cremes. One cent each; dark, bitter chocolate with soft, creamy, sweet white centers.

She bought ten of them that day and ate three as she walked to the apartment where she lived. She wondered where she could hide the rest so her mother wouldn't find them.

But when she got home, her mother kissed her and smelled the candy. She said, "You aren't helping yourself at all—you could be such a pretty girl if only you'd make a little effort. You know the doctor says it will get harder and harder if you don't do it now."

The child couldn't answer. More misery, more shame, and even more, a hopelessness--because all she could think of as she walked to her room and shut the door was where she could hide the candy until bedtime, and what she could steal from the kitchen before supertime.

When I wrote that, I was beginning to understand that child—but I hated her. Now I feel a great tenderness toward her, because I worked hard for a long time to understand where she came from.

I recall an episode when I was about five or six years old and was given scrambled eggs for breakfast. I didn't eat them. My mother said if I didn't eat them I'd get them again for lunch. At lunchtime they were cold and awful and I refused them again. I got them once more for supper and by then, with a good deal of gagging I ate them. I lost that round. Eating had then become the battleground in a struggle for power.

It seems clear that by the time I was three or four years old, food had become a comfort, a weapon, a currency for the exchanging of emotions—love, anger, rebellion, passivity, acquiescence, rejection. I was a good girl when I ate and a bad girl when I did not.

A few years later, eating became being a bad girl. People were beginning to worry; I was getting too heavy. While I might have experienced anger and withdrawal of love, before because I wouldn't eat, now I was getting disapproving looks because I could pack away as much as my grandfather. Food, the great comforter, had become off limits.

Whether we have become fat children mostly because of hereditary tendencies, or because we were born big, or because we were underfed or overfed, by the time we were six or seven years old the image we have of ourselves begins to interfere with our capacity to deny ourselves the comfort of food. Almost any child who is told by adults that he must lose weight is likely to assume that he is abnormal—not like anyone else.

## FEELING FAT

One area of insecurity is likely to lead to many. By second grade I also felt dumb; it seemed quite natural to be fat and dumb. When you are young and in deadly competition with all your peers, anything that represents a feeling of being handicapped in some way spreads into every other area of your life.

Fat children tend to use the fact of being overweight as an explanation for the perfectly normal doubts and misgivings of childhood. I never met a child who didn't sometimes feel shy, dumb, ugly or unpopular. Thin children blame their troubles on having freckles, or poor coordination or curly hair, or straight hair, or being nearsighted, or having a high voice or a low voice, or being the teacher's pet.

Adolescence is the time when self-hatred reaches monumental proportions. Everyone, including the most beautiful and handsome, the athletes and the geniuses, feels insecure and uncertain. Adolescence is a time for the normal emergence of powerful sexual feelings, and both parents and children tend to become too anxious, too threatened to communicate with each other effectively.

During adolescence, the neurotic interaction between parent and child about being overweight becomes even more intense. Mother is anxious and frightened. Is her child going to be as unattractive as perhaps mother feels she is? She is sure that she has failed and her guilt is profound. The more guilt she feels, the more she nags.

## UGLY AND ASHAMED

The child (and this seems true for both boys and girls) feels ugly and ashamed. Eating increasingly becomes a way of comforting oneself—and also of punishing the parent, who is finally vulnerable. When I was very little, I ate what my mother told me to eat; as a teenager, I learned that I could control her by eating what she didn't want me to eat. Since most adolescents need to find some area of rebellion against parents, food becomes a logical weapon.