

Eating Disorder Hope™

Fran Weiss, LCSW-R, BCD, DCSW, CGP



Ask the Expert...Fran Weiss, LCSW-R, BCD, DCSW, CGP, is an individual and group psychotherapist in private practice in New York City. She is on the faculty at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine, Sr. Psychotherapy Consultant to the New York Obesity Research Center, St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital Center, NYC, a member of the American Group Psychotherapy Association and the Eastern Group Psychotherapy Association, Academy for Eating Disorders, National Association of Social Workers, Private Section. Board Certified Diplomat. She is the creator of B.I.T.E. The Body Image Transformation Experience® and has written and lectured extensively on issues of weight, self-perception and body image. She also runs workshops for and mentors mental health professionals.

[B.I.T.E. The Body Image Transformation Experience®](#)

www.FranWeiss.com

Question:

Dear Fran,

I am in my 30's, single and about 50 lbs. overweight. I have lost weight several times in the past but have regained it. I want to lose weight more than anything, but this time I can't seem to take any of the right steps. I know that my life would be so much better. I'd be happier, buy better clothes, have more dates...everything would be better! I've tried all of the popular diets, been to different programs. They all seem great at first. I get excited about being thin, and then I have some kind of problem in my life, not even a big problem, and I find myself overeating again. It makes me feel like the whole thing is hopeless, or maybe it's me that's hopeless. Is this the kind of problem that you work with?

Janet

Dear Janet,

Yes. I work with people who want to understand the internal conflicts that are getting in the way of having lives they want. It sounds like you have been at the 'weight loss business' for a long time, with some positive and some not-so-positive results. The good news is that you have been a participant in your weight loss process. You know that you can succeed and you're not willing to give up. The bad news is that something inside of you, which you are not fully aware of, is getting in the way of your ability to hold to your course. We both know that losing weight can be a very difficult process. Weight loss is not like finishing a term paper. Once you've researched the material and written the paper, the task is finished. After weight loss, there is the ongoing work of maintenance.

My work and research have illuminated several things:

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- Diets alone don't work
- Traditional psychotherapy helps people understand themselves, but isn't enough for eating behaviors and permanent weight loss.
- Internal makeovers (body image change, self image) need to parallel external changes (diet, behaviors).

Maintaining weight loss requires continuing commitment. But you are not hopeless; many people have faced the same problems and overcome them. You may need to understand the emotional underpinnings of your attitudes to food, weight and body image. Perhaps there was a time in your early life when overeating was a soothing remedy for fear or loneliness.

People struggle to let go of overeating, because it immediately alleviates stress--and is soothing, like a best friend. Even when the situation changes, the 'solution' becomes the problem. Seen from this perspective, an ambivalence about losing is understandable. It takes work to recognize what the original problem was, to what extent it is still operative in your life, and to really get it that you have different choices now. It takes strength to endure the pain of old losses that you masked with food. Once you understand the inner mechanics, learning to regulate your feelings is like learning to regulate your food intake—not easy, not something that can be done all at once, but something that makes obvious sense, like diet and exercise.

I would recommend that you find a therapist with a solid grounding in interpersonal issues and a sub-specialty in issues of weight and body image. In my work I make use of a team including a licensed nutritionist, an internist and an endocrinologist, but the focus is on individual and group therapy to comb your early history for clues about your current distress, to explore feelings about self and change, and to offer empathic support.

Question:

Dear Fran,

I am so upset. I STILL FEEL FAT AND UGLY after having lost about 75 pounds! I am a woman in my mid 40's. I have always had a weight problem. At least I thought I had a weight problem. For my entire life, in my family, my weight was the focus of my parents' life. I was just never right to them. Now, when I look at childhood pictures of myself, I recognize that in fact I wasn't that different from any other kid around. Perhaps I was chubby, but if I saw a kid like that on the street I'd think she was cute. But I felt like a monster. And my weight loss and now slim body has NOT changed the way I feel about myself. I am VERY disappointed. When I am objective, I can look in the mirror and see that in fact I weigh much less. I think I do look better. I am now able to buy clothes in my favorite shops, the kind of little dresses and skirts I used to long for. I thought if only I could wear those pretty things I would be happy. BUT, now I'm wearing them and I still don't feel right. It's like I just don't fit in. Men have been paying more attention to me than ever. I find myself ANGRY as well as flattered. I want to get even. WHERE were they when I was 75 lbs. heavier? Why do they have the right to approach me now, when before they would not even look twice? Sometimes I want to say insulting things to a man who has just paid me a compliment! Am I crazy? Instead of feeling beautiful, I feel like the same old ugly, fat person! Is this normal? Help!
Angela

Dear Angela,

I welcome your letter, since I believe that it captures how many feel after they've accomplished the feat that you have. 75 lbs. Congratulations. Now, of course the problem is twofold: keeping it off, plus mourning what might have been. Often losing weight catalyzes grief for missed as well as painful experiences. Putting weight back on masks the painful grief (temporarily.) (I don't mean to be negative, but this is always the challenge.) And you and I both know that unless your "still fat and ugly feelings" don't shift, your frustration may lead you down the slippery slope to overeating. What you present as your problem is 'huge'. So, one step at a time. You have apparently, with great effort, managed to accomplish 'outside change'. This is certainly NOT a small feat. Now you will need to embrace 'inside' change, an 'inner make-over' if you will. What I'm about to say is not a "blame game". But, apparently, something in the way your family of origin operated made weight and looks a central focus. Often this is a result of parents' frustrations with their own lives. (This is a bit like the old story of yelling at the cab driver when you are really angry at your boss. The low man on the totem pole gets it. In a family

that place is usually reserved for one or more of the kids.) One thing to note right away: THIS IS NOT YOUR FAULT!

Body image, our perception of ourselves in size, shape and emotion evolves during our formative years. The process of growing and maturing to adulthood builds on this initial framework. We inherit our biological make-up from our parents, and then we learn about ourselves through their eyes. (Grandparents, siblings, and others can have a powerful effect as well.) At first, we are like sponges. We absorb all of the information we pick up from our parents--what they say and what they don't, their body language and how they treat us. Finally we become old enough to question these perceptions and to form truly separate identities. But by then we have 'taken in' a lot of stuff-- good stuff and not-so-good. We make our parents into parts of ourselves and their voices become our own. It sounds like you took in, over a long period, some profoundly negative messages. No wonder your feelings about yourself are so harsh! No wonder you can't enjoy your success. You have accomplished a "Hollow Victory"—weight loss without all of the goodies one would expect to follow.

Therapy can work to counteract your distorted self-image, and to bolster the part of you that was strong enough to lose 75 lbs and clear enough to see that you were in fact a cute little girl, not a monster. While individual work is important to give you the undivided attention you need (which people treated as reflection of their parents' unhappiness sorely need) group therapy also offers powerful advantages. Group is a safe place to gain emotional experience in the world, to see through your own misunderstandings and those of others. You are mirrored not only by the therapist but also by a gathering of your peers. Common and forbidden subjects are explored behind closed doors where confidentiality is guaranteed and everyone is looking at the light and dark sides of themselves.

I've created a short-term group workshop, B.I.T.E The Body Image Transformation Experience®, which focuses on working with participants to shift the kinds of distorted self-perceptions that plague you. This kind of workshop can be an introduction or an adjunct to continuing therapy. None of this is easy, but it works.

Question:

Dear Fran,

I'm not sure you're the right person to ask, but I don't know who would be. I am filled with shame and moral judgments about myself. I have struggled with my weight and feelings about myself for a long time. I come from a regular family. Mom and Dad worked; like my siblings, I was expected to do well in school and be a good person. My parents aren't deeply religious, but do follow the Golden Rule and believe in self-respect and self-reliance. I did fine as a teenager, I never got in trouble, and I thought that would continue.

But when I got to college it was like it all crashed down on me. I was anxious all the time. There were so many people with so many different ideas and opinions. We were told we were adults now. I liked the freedom, I was happy, but I couldn't stop eating. I continually struggled with food. Thank goodness I never threw up or did any of that stuff, but I gained about 40 lbs. I tried to pretend I didn't care. Then I graduated and got a job where I had to present myself to new people all the time, and I couldn't stand the idea of being fat anymore. It seemed pathetic and unprofessional as well as making me feel unattractive. I worked very hard at dieting and exercise and have managed to control my food.

Now I am having another problem. Dare I say it? I have become out of control sexually. I think more in my head than in actuality, at least so far. I am always thinking about men. I live in a big city and nobody can tell me what to do, but I have to look in the mirror every morning. I'm afraid that my compulsion for food has now shifted to sex. I am doing things I never dreamed of and am very embarrassed...ashamed. Please help me. I don't want to become fat again.

Chloe

Dear Chloe,

You are a very brave woman to write. I am certain that what is going on in your mind is also going on in others who have had the "fat/ eating struggle". Thank you for the opportunity to delve into this with you!

First of all, slow down. You are not alone in this. And though you need to be careful, you are not crazy or bad. You're going through what most people go through as teenagers; if they're lucky, they have involved parents to help them understand

