

THE STOP BINGE EATING PODCAST

with Kirstin Sarfde

Ep #98: Chronic Physical Pain

Hi. Today's episode is about eating to comfort yourself when you're feeling physical pain. I talk a lot on this podcast about eating to comfort emotional pain, but today I wanted to address physical pain.

A lot of you probably don't have chronic pain, but I wanted to do an episode on it anyway because although you may not have chronic pain, there may be times when you feel some sort of physical pain and you eat to help yourself feel better and to distract yourself from the pain.

Although I don't have chronic pain, I've experienced intense pain many times in my life, most often with period cramps. There was one specific time I'll never forget when they were so bad that I was sent home from work. I swore I would never be the girl that left work because of her cramps, I thought it was such a cop out. But this one day, I just couldn't do it.

I was working at a restaurant at the time and whenever I had a minute to spare, I'd go out back into the dry storage area, crouch down, and cry a little bit. There were times I'd be standing at a table taking an order and the cramps would hit and I'd start to tear up. Eventually, one of my co-workers saw me and told me manager and my manager told me to go home.

In times like those, there's just nothing you can do. I tried taking the medication my doctor gave me but even after taking it, it still hurt so much. There's been many other times too when it wasn't as bad as that time, and the medication did work, but it still took time to kick in so I'd have to go through the pain until it did.

I've worked with several women who have experienced chronic physical pain in many aspects – back pain, leg pain, endometriosis, digestive issues.

These women have been eating to numb their emotional pain and they were also eating to try and numb the physical pain.

Food becomes the solution for everything that's uncomfortable. It's a way to create some kind of good feeling. So even if you're in pain, you at least have food that feels good temporarily. It's also a way to distract your mind away from it. It gives you something else to focus on.

That's why you might want to eat when you're in pain. You think you'll feel better and you want to distract yourself from the pain.

But really, and I'm sure you know this by now, eating doesn't actually solve anything.

It's not going to make your pain go away. If anything, it's just going to create more pain. You'll create emotional pain on top of your physical pain. And if you binge, you're creating more physical pain on top of your physical pain.

In that moment you think you're doing something to help yourself, but really, you're just making things worse.

You want to get away from the pain and then you end up creating more of it.

But what about when eating does actually make you feel better? I've had people tell me before that when they have stomach or some kind of intestinal pain that eating really does help it.

I'm not going to argue this, maybe it does. Maybe it does ease the pain somehow.

And if this is true for you, you have a choice to make here. You can either eat to feel better or you can choose to let the pain happen.

There's no right or wrong here, just you knowing how you want to handle it and handling it in a way that gives you the results you want.

It's just like with emotionally eating. You can eat to feel better, that's an option. But you also feel the feeling and not eat. You choose which you want based on your goals and the results you want in your life.

That being said, if you choose to eat, remember that although eating food may help you feel better, bingeing won't. It doesn't feel good to overload your body, especially when it's hurting. Eat what calms the pain, and that's it. Don't use it as an excuse to eat a whole bunch of food.

So, if eating doesn't truly help in any real way, like if you have back pain, or pain in any other part of your body that doesn't involve digesting food, it most likely isn't going to help you to truly handle the pain.

And you know what else won't? Getting upset about it, complaining, and giving up on trying to live a fulfilled life because of it.

I have a client who has endometriosis. There are times when she can't do much besides lay in bed, rest, and watch tv and she would get really upset about this. She would feel so resentful of her pain.

Of course in the moments when she's debilitated by her pain, she cries it out.

But then when she's not, she gets so mad that she is a person who goes through that.

She feels victimy and throws pity parties and then would eat to try and feel better not because of her physical pain, since she's not feeling it in that moment, but because of the emotional pain she's then

causing herself.

She'd make plans for herself and schedule things she wanted to get done, but then it would all not happen and not get done because she just didn't have the energy to do them. She'd get really upset about this.

She'd complain about not doing things and not getting things done.

But this is what she didn't know. She didn't know that her experience outside of the pain could be better if she wasn't complaining about it so much. She didn't know that she was affecting the painless moments of her life so negatively that she couldn't even enjoy them.

How you choose to think about your pain is up to you. You can think it's ruining your life, that you're so limited, and that you can't do anything. Those might feel very true to you and you might be able to find a lot of evidence to prove those thoughts true.

But they're still just thoughts and how you're describing your pain. They're thoughts and just like with all thoughts, they're optional and how you choose to look at it. Even if they are true, there's other truths too.

Months back I watched Queer Eye on Netflix. Great show by the way if you haven't watched it.

On one episode there was a man who was paralyzed from the waist down and is spending the rest of his life in a wheel chair. What's so amazing about him is how he talks about how his life is better since he was injured. Better, after losing the use of his legs.

There's so much he can't do anymore but there he is, thinking about all the ways his life is better now.

So inspirational.

One of my clients told me about all the things she can't do because of her back. She can't walk for too long, she thinks she's a hinderance to other people who want to do active things, she feels limited, she thinks she doesn't have any fun because she spend so much of her time at appointments to help her with it all and by nighttime she can't do much more physically. There's things she can't do that she wants to do and she's unhappy about it.

So I challenged her to tell me what is fun in her life. I challenged her to tell me what she can do and what she can do for fun.

And she had answers. She had all these answers but she didn't see them before because she was so focused on all she was missing out on.

Even with her pain, she could still be fulfilled in her life because it's not our bodies that create fulfillment for us. It's our minds. She still has a mind that's capable of creating thoughts and creating emotions and she can still use it to create what she wants even when she feels pain, and especially when she's not feeling it.

It's the same with my other client I was telling you about. She could spend more time enjoying the pain-free moments but instead she's dwelling on the pain she felt earlier or that she anticipates she'll

feel tomorrow.

If you're someone who experiences chronic pain, or you're someone who doesn't but you're obviously going to experience some kind of acute physical pain in your life because it happens, be gentle with yourself.

Allow it to happen instead of causing more issues for yourself.

Cry if you want to cry. Lay down and do nothing if you want to. This happened to me a couple months ago. One evening I experienced excruciating stomach pain. It came and went every few minutes and when it came, oh my, it was awful. I even contemplated going to the hospital but decided to ride it out and see what happened before doing that since first of all, I'm not one to run to hospital at the first sign of pain and second, it was peak coronavirus time and I did not want to be at a hospital during all that.

The pain lasted for a good 2-3 hours. While it was happening, I laid on the couch, went through it, eventually went to bed, and it still hurt. Thankfully it did lessen so I was able to fall asleep but man, it was not only scary, but also agonizing.

And I made it through. I made it all the way through to the other side and didn't reach to food or alcohol or pot like I would have in the past to help me get through it. I just did it.

Now, I know that some of you may hear that story and kind of like shoo me away, like I have no idea what you go through, and you're right, I don't.

One of my clients actually said that to me once. She said I had no idea what it was like to experience the kind of pain she experiences in her back and her leg. And I agreed with her. I don't.

But what I do know is that eating won't make it better. Eating won't solve the pain. And getting upset, throwing yourself pity parties, and feeling resentful of your pain isn't going to help you live a more fulfilling life in the midst of your pain.

When you're in the middle of it, and it's really intense, like debilitatingly intense, that's one thing. Cry it out and curl up and feel terrible.

But when you can function, and you're in a moment when you're not feeling it, eating or complaining isn't really going to help.

You feel pain. You are a person with a medical condition that causes pain. This is your reality. Do you want to spend your life arguing with this reality or accepting it and living your life as best you can with it?

Those are the options you have.

And when you choose acceptance, that's also when you'll be in a much cleaner emotional space that will allow you to come up with real solutions. When you're emotional, food is the answer. Food is how you'll get through it. But that's not your only option.

You can feel it. You can ask for help. You can do whatever has been recommended to you as a healthy remedy.

And while you're at it, you can choose to stop focusing on what you can't do and focus on what you can.

Pain, emotional and physical, is part of life and eating isn't going to make it better. Don't try to eat your way out of it, do your thought work to make the experience more neutral and less negative, and do what you can do. There's probably more you can do than you're giving yourself credit for.

Have a nice week, bye bye.