



FOOD CUE MANAGEMENT FOR HOUSEHOLDS

Goal of the Handout: This Handout is designed to help food addicts and their household understand what happens in their brains when they are exposed to reminders of processed foods.

Application: The Handout is aimed at three results. 1. It is designed to reduce the pain of self-blame and perception of failure in the food addict. This goal has a secondary outcome which is to reduce stress. Stress is associated with cravings. 2. The handout will hopefully motivate the client to avoid cues. It is hard to believe that avoiding cues is so important, but cue avoidance can make the difference between success and failure at controlling cravings. 3. The information in the Hand-out can be used to help educate and persuade people in the addict's life to avoid exposing the client to cues.

Cues

Cues are any reminder of processed foods. Associative cues are also powerful and include people, places, things, times, and events that were present during processed food use or availability. In westernized cultures, processed food cues are extensive in shopping, entertainment, workplace, home, faith, and social environments.

Cue-Reactivity and Sensitivity

Cue-reactivity is the cascade of processes that occur in a brain that has been sensitized to processed foods through repeated use or repeated exposure to cues. Brains may be more sensitive based on genetics. Brains may also have become more sensitive due to compounding factors such as exposure to many different kinds of sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of processed foods. Prolonged exposure to cues and exposure/use under intense emotions can also heighten sensitivity.

In this scenario, the brain has been taught or 'conditioned' to make this response in the same way that Pavlov's dogs were conditioned to salivate in response to a bell that had been rung when their food arrived. The dogs did not decide to salivate. The salivation was an automatic response beyond their control.

The degree of severity of sensitivity of the brain is important to understand. Understanding severity of sensitivity guides clients in how much cue avoidance they need in order to prevent cravings and maintain their recovery. Severity of sensitivity can change with circumstances. If clients have been exposed to cues, or are tired, stressed, or recently experienced intense emotions, then severity of sensitivity can be heightened. Increased sensitivity can last for days or longer. Under these circumstances, clients learn that they would benefit from avoiding cues and spending time calming the brain. Understanding that severity of sensitivity can change helps people surrounding the client understand why they might not be able to go into food places at one point, even if it's been OK at another time. This is not irrational behavior on the part of the food addict. It's very smart to recognize that safe behavior can change. The addict is entitled to support and accommodation from other people in this need to avoid food places when sensitivity is high.

Severity of sensitivity' means how much cravings neurotransmitters the brain is likely to produce. Five craving pathways in the brain have been shown to react to processed food cues by releasing a 'flood' of craving neurotransmitters. These include the dopamine, opiate, serotonin, endorphin, and endocannabinoid pathways. The more sensitive the brain, the greater the flooding. Food addicts experience this as intense urges, longing, or cravings that are overwhelming in the sense that the client desperately wants to take action to make the cravings stop. This desperate longing is not under the control of the client. It is an autonomic response.

When the craving pathways 'flood' in exposure to processed food cues, another reaction also occurs. This is the suppression of cognitive functions such as decision-making, memory, and restraint. This loss of reasoning is a possible explanation for why food addicts lose control over the use of processed foods when exposure to cues has been too long, frequent, or combined with intense emotions. It is helpful for people around the addict to recognize a cravings flare-up. They should not be persuaded to give the addict processed foods in this moments of relapse.

Helping the food addict

People around the addict can really help. Reactions to people are one of the leading causes of relapse. People around the addict can recognize shifts in cue sensitivity and move to help the addict get to a calming place. Even encouraging the addict to just think about the tip of the nose and breathe deeply can help. Turning on music or a meditation or faith-based reading are all ways to help a food addicts get through a cravings flare-up safely. Of course knowledge keeps us from frustration. With the knowledge of how the brain responds to cues, people around the addict no longer need to be confused or frustrated or judgmental. Refraining from these behaviors is a relief to both addict and people around the addict.

Conclusion: You can do this

With the knowledge of how cues and associated cues can affect the brain, the food addict and people around the addict can team up to keep the addict safe from processed food stimulation. The rewards are great. To be calm is to be happy. Life opens up to wonderful possibilities in a household which is free from the diseases and mood swings associated with processed foods. It's easier to be around a food addict when cravings are kept at bay and rational thought is available to manage and enjoy life.