

## Donald Trump Makes You Fat

I am serious. Listening to people like Donald Trump can make you fat. And it's not just Donald Trump's blathering and tweeting that can do it. Listening to any hate mongerer or conspiracy theorist – whether it's Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, a Qanon posting or the homophobic, sexist, and/or racist rantings of your Uncle Bob - anyone who grabs your attention and plays on your fears can do it.

Of course, it's not enough to just listen. For the fear mongering or conspiracy theories to really affect you, you have to really listen to it and believe the message. You can't just hear or read the message and think, "What a moron!" You have to believe what they say. You have to believe that you will burn in hell if you don't stop the gay menace or fail to spit when you hear a news report about "Black Lives Matter" or the "Me Too" movement. And it's not enough to listen to this once, believe it and then forget about it like all those dates you memorized for history exams. You have to keep listening, keep hearing the message and live in mortal fear that awful things are happening now.

If you have cultivated your information consumption to avoid hate mongering and conspiracy theory, you might want to pat yourself on the back. The not so good news is that right wing nutcases aren't the only sources of chronic fear. Most of us feel the impact of fear on a daily basis. Whether the fear we struggle with is fear of rejection, judgment, humiliation, pain, disappointment, meaninglessness, commitment, intimacy, failure, death, or the unknown, the fear is real and it invades our lives, limits our decisions and guides our choices.

How does fear make you fat?

Fear floods the body with adrenaline and cortisol. This is great when you are actually being threatened. If you are facing a hungry tiger who thinks that you look tasty or a street punk who's pumped to beat you up, these hormones will give you the sudden energy boost you need to get away. But when adrenaline and cortisol racing through your body becomes the status quo, you're in trouble. Elevated cortisol levels knock your blood sugar levels out of kilter, which leads to sugar cravings. Elevated cortisol levels can also wreak havoc on your thyroid, causing your metabolism to slow down. With your metabolism running in low gear, it's hard not to pack on the pounds, even if you manage to power through the sugar cravings caused by the blood sugar imbalances.

Sounds far fetched? Well think about the last big chronic scare you had. Maybe you were watching the polls and it looked like Romney was likely to win the presidential election. Maybe you were sexually or physically abused as a child and the memories haunt you. Maybe you were terrified that your mind would go blank when you were sitting for the most important exam of your life. Maybe you were horrified by the possibility of that your parents would reject you if they found out you were gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender or that you secretly fantasized about becoming an accountant. Maybe you saw the writing on the wall at work that you were about to be downsized, outsourced, or fired and were not having luck finding a new job. The key is what happened when the fear took hold. If you found yourself rummaging through your partner's or roommate's secret chocolate stash or sitting in front of the Starbucks drive---thru with a Cheesecake Brownie and a Caramel Macchiato, or making an emergency grocery run for Lays Potato Chips, Reese's Pieces, and a couple of Crispy Cream donuts, you aren't alone. Fear sends you looking for a feel good rush that

only a high carb treat can provide. The irony is that the more your life becomes ruled by fear, the more you begin to look like Donald Trump. Now there's something to be afraid of\*\*.

What to do.... Well, obviously, it's not good to listen to fear-mongers and conspiracy theorists. And research shows that Fox News makes you stupid\*a^. And it's not a bad idea to cut back on your intake of news every so often. Even the news on NPR can bring you down. And I hate to say it because Amy Goodman is one of my personal heroes, but a daily diet of Democracy Now can lead to bad news overload.

Other than a restricted news and talk show diet, what can you do? First thing is to acknowledge your fear\*~. Name it. Journal about it. Accept it. It may seem unfathomable, but actually acknowledging the fact that you are terrified of speaking in public or that you were sexually abused as a child and are afraid that your partner's touch may be similarly hurtful can take some of the power away. Second, explore it. What is the worst thing that will happen if you forget what you were supposed to say in front of 10, or 100, or 1,000 people? What is the worst thing that will happen if you let someone touch you this way? Third, analyze the fear. Most of us hide behind our analytical minds anyway. "Who me? I don't need to feel. I can think just fine, thank you." But we can use this to our advantage. If you accidentally say "fornicate" instead of "formulate" in front of your audience, will you really die? Or will you just be embarrassed as they laugh at your faux pas. Are you really the powerless child you once were or do you have power you can bring to bear if you need to make someone stop hurting you? Can you list the differences between your lover and the person who sexually abused you? Can you list the sources of power you have now that you didn't have then? Fourth, respond to your fear. Find a way to address your fear in a safe way. Maybe do a speech in front of your partner or best friend and imagine that there is an audience. If this goes OK, you might try stepping your speaking efforts up to a Toastmasters group. Or, in the case of early sexual abuse, talk to your partner about your triggers and allow yourself to set boundaries. You have a right to say, "Don't touch me here." Or, "Don't touch me without asking first." It's also reasonable to ask your partner to tell you that he/she won't hurt you or to tell you that he/she isn't your Mother.

Breathing also helps.

\*\*This isn't true for everyone. Some people manage their fear by obsessing about food without having to take the effort (or have the consequences) of eating it (anorexia) or slide into a binge/purge cycle (bulimia). Both of these strategies for coping come with extensive emotional and psychological costs. If you are struggling with either avoiding eating or bingeing and purging, it is really important that you find help. These strategies can be deadly. Contact me at the e---mail address below and I will help you find someone who will listen and help you who won't judge you or treat you like you are crazy. I swear on my cats.

\*^You can't make this up. People who watch Fox News know less about world events than people who watch no news at all.

\*~Based on Embracing Fear by Thom Rutledge.

An earlier version of this column appeared in Outlook Columbus.