

'Freeing Yourself from Emotional Eating' Topic of Presentation at Library

By Carol Graham

Food is known to nourish the body and add zest to our days. But for many, eating becomes an unwinnable tug-of-war waged between the mind and the body.

"Does anyone know what emotional eating is?" Christine Dickson, Ph.D., asked the attendees at her Livermore Public Library Civic Center talk on April 12, "Free Yourself From Emotional Eating."

An audience member responded, "For me, it's when I eat in reaction to something. I may or may not actually be hungry at all."

"That's the basic idea," said Dickson, noting that food does more than fill our stomachs; it also appeases feelings. "What got me onto this topic 12 years ago is that I had a very strong emotional response to a loss in my life - a deep grief. My appetite changed. When I began to heal, I started to explore what the relationship with food means."

Dickson said she discovered that when we learn to manage our emotions, we can eat whatever we want, whenever we want; always eat the right amount, and maintain our optimum weight.

"It seems like I'm lying, like I'm telling a story that can't possibly be real," she said. "It definitely can be a reality and a possibility."

The presentation's key points

covered the effects of emotions on eating, how to differentiate between emotional urges and biological cravings, and how to manage emotions to maintain an ideal weight.

Many audience members shared their early recollections of eating experiences within their families. "My parents grew up in the Depression. It was waste not, want not; we learned to clean our plates," said one attendee.

Another woman said, "I grew up in a Greek family. If you love someone you feed them. If you *really* love them, you overfeed them."

Dickson said that sometimes our minds become stuck in old ways that aren't working. "In caveman days, food was scarce; you had to eat it when it was available. However, for the last 50 years, we have had a tremendous abundance of food. We still eat like there's no tomorrow."

To understand emotional ties to food, Dickson recommends throwing some away. It can bring agonizing feelings of guilt and fear, and can take on the feeling of sinning against God.

At least one audience member understands that tie completely. "I'll eat something before I throw it away. I'll freeze it even - at least till it molds," she admitted.

The founder of Tri-Valley Psychotherapy in Pleasanton, Dickson further discussed the

overeating triggers of boredom, anxiety and rewarding ourselves.

"You can manage your emotions and behaviors," she said, suggesting a combination of emotional, mind and body awareness. "You can exercise your mind."

The first step is always starting with a doctor appointment to ensure there are no physical underlying causes to overeating and weight gain.

The second step, said Dickson, is to stop doing strenuous, heavy exercise which can cause the body to react with intense hunger pangs. "Put that time into managing your mind instead," she said. "Go for a 30-60 minute easy walk, or try yoga or Tai Chi."

Improving mindfulness is also valuable, although Dickson said it's important throughout the day, not just for 45 minutes sitting in your room with your eyes closed. "Connect to your breath. When you do, you connect to your body," she said. "Center yourself, and calm yourself with a few deep breaths when driving, when walking, first thing in the morning, when sharing a hug or before making a telephone call."

Perhaps the most important choice of all is learning to tolerate distress. "There are several behaviors that can help," she said. "Distract yourself, improve

the moment, learn to self-soothe, and think of the possible pros of a situation."

Dickson's presentation was part of the library's "Friends, Authors and Arts" program. "Health and nutrition topics are always popular," said Librarian Joyce Nevins. "Dr. Dickson is an accomplished speaker who has presented to library programs before, so she was a good fit for us."

Dickson has been presenting a six-month series at the Pleasanton Library called, "Creating A Happier and Healthier *You* in the New Year." Upcoming topics include "Build Your Emotional Intelligence," on April 19; "Move Beyond Your Mind," on May 17; and "Become an Optimist," on June 21.

"Programs are a great way to introduce the library to people in our community who may not use our services yet," said Nevins. "Plus it gives us an opportunity to introduce some of our local and Bay Area talent, as well as the Livermore and Tri-valley organizations that we collaborate with."

Nevins noted that feedback for Dickson's presentation was highly positive. She added, "Perhaps we'll have Dr. Dickson back to talk about emotional intelligence; another timely issue."