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# the HAES® files: The Dangers of Living in a Safe House

BY HEALTH AT EVERY SIZE® BLOG

by Stacey Nye, PhD

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I recently presented a workshop at a local spa on healing disconnected eating. As a guest presenter, my husband and I were treated to a weekend of complimentary food, exercise classes and other presentations by the spa's staff. He attended a workshop given by the staff nutritionist on eating healthy. I was having my complimentary massage at this time, so had to come late. By the time I arrived, he was incensed. "She's teaching people to have a "safe house!" he exclaimed under his breath. "And they are all smiling, asking questions and shaking their heads in agreement!" After living with me for over 15 years, he knows better. He's been educated about the dangers of dieting and the alternative wisdom of the HAES®/ Intuitive Eating process (1,2).

I was raised in a "safe house". There was simply no candy, chips, or junk food of any kind. My mother was a chronic dieter and did not allow it into the house. As a result, whenever I went out and this food was available, I ate it, a lot of it. Friends who kept Fritos, Cheetos and Oreos in their pantry were treasure havens to me. The families of the children I babysat for likely had far fewer candy bars after I was there than before. If there were M&Ms at a party I attended, I parked myself right next to the bowl. Obviously, growing up in a safe house did not teach me to no longer crave junk food; it just taught me that I had to get it elsewhere and to eat as much as I could while I was there, because who knew when I would be invited over again?

I do not blame my mother. Her intentions were good. The prevailing wisdom at the time (and unfortunately still today) was that fat people needed to lose weight and stop eating food that they enjoy. So, my mother took my sister and me with her to Weight Watchers, and cleaned out the house of its goodies. It didn't work. Oh sure, we lost weight on Weight Watchers. Lots of times. Lost 10 pounds, gained 15. Lost 20 pounds, gained 25. Lost 30 pounds, gained 40. Most of my patients can attest to the fact that they weigh more now than when they started dieting. In fact, research (3,4) has shown that yo-yo dieting and chronic weight fluctuations are unhealthy than simply maintaining a higher weight. The nature of dieting is the problem. People go on a diet, stop eating the food they love, lose weight, and then either go off the diet,

returning to their old habits, or have breakthroughs of binge eating while on the diet, secondary to hunger and feelings of deprivation. Studies show (5,6) that only 5% of people who go on diets are able to maintain their weight loss long term. Plus, despite a booming multi-billion dollar diet industry, Americans are fatter (7) than they used to be. So obviously, safe houses aren't keeping anyone "safe" from getting fat.

So what, you may wonder, is the alternative? The HAES® approach encourages us to "eat in a way which balances individual nutritional needs, hunger, satiety, appetite, and pleasure". For example, my kitchen is no longer a safe house. The refrigerator is stocked with cheese, yogurt, fruit, lettuce, condiments, leftovers, etc. In my cabinets you will find nuts, peanut butter, potato chips, rice crackers, cereal and candy. Lots of candy. Chocolate, even. Except for diet soda (which my husband loves), you won't find any non-fat, low-carb, sugar-free items.



Take a good look at the ingredient list from a Skinny Cow ice cream sandwich. Are there things on this list that you don't recognize as food? How can eating something that contains "acesulfame potassium" improve your health? And, they certainly don't increase the likelihood that you will lose weight, either. What they take out of items like these are the very things that contribute to how satisfying they are, usually the fat. Substituting diet ice cream for real ice cream won't fool your body, and you're more likely to more of it. The label even warns of the "laxative effect" from excess consumption!

You may be worried, though, that if you bring real ice cream (or chips or candy, etc.) into your house that you will overeat them. Well, let's do an experiment: think of your favorite food. A forbidden food, one that you don't allow yourself to eat very often. Now imagine that this food suddenly has no calories, and now you can eat as much as you want without fear of gaining weight. As an example, let's say you choose potato chips (one of my favorite foods). How many potato chips do you

think you would eat? A whole bag you say? How often would you eat a whole bag of potato chips? Once a day, twice a day? And how many days in a row do you think you would eat a whole bag of potato chips? Probably not many. Eventually, you would probably get sick of potato chips. Not that you would never want to eat potato chips again, but as soon as the power was taken away from them, the threat of eventual deprivation gone, they would become like any other food in the house.

Don't believe me? It's true. If we listen to our bodies, it will tell us what we need. Like in the movie *Field of Dreams*, "if you build it, they will come"; if we listen, our bodies will tell us. The problem is that no one is listening. We're too busy listening to Oprah, or Dr. Phil, or Suzanne Somers, or Dr. Atkins. When we rely on external cues to tell us what and when and how much to eat, we lose touch with our internal cues; cues that we were born with, and that work pretty well until someone comes along and takes us to Weight Watchers. Can you think of a time that you went off your diet, really splurged for an extended period of time, like on vacation, and came home and just wanted a salad and a chicken breast? This is an example of your body telling you what you need. And what we need is to eat when we're hungry, stop when we are full, eat a variety of foods and not eliminate any food groups.

As proof, look at how some kids eat. Unless they are in a "safe house," kids eat completely based on their internal cues. They eat when they're hungry and stop when they're full. They don't rely on the clock on the wall, or the calories listed on the label or the article in *Self* magazine to tell them when or what to eat. If it doesn't taste good, they simply won't eat it. And they could leave one chocolate chip on the plate because when they are full they are **done eating**. Can someone who lives in a safe house do that? I never could, at least not until I opened my house up to formerly forbidden foods, that is. Now, I can leave one bite on my plate, and it drives my mother crazy.

So, do you have a safe house? And if yes, what do you really think you are keeping yourself safe from?

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