

# “Substitution & Suicide”

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In acting, there is a technique called “Substitution” where the actor substitutes an actual experience, or the feelings from that experience, to help them personalize whatever the situation of the character is. For example, if the character needs to be relating to a dying brother, but the actor is having difficulty creating that reality for himself, he could either recall how he felt when his grandmother or dog or someone else died – or he could look at the actor playing the dying brother and imagine his actual brother (or sister) in the situation of dying – allowing whatever feelings to come up to inform his behavior as the character.

Well, I knew that there were specific times when I was more likely to want to partake in unhealthy behavior with food. For me, it was usually at night upon leaving an event (often where I was well fed) and getting in my car and instantly flashing on where I could stop on the way home to get some impulse food that I tended to frequent on such occasions. I was aware that I was visualizing the food & even the store where I’d buy it – also that I had some internal talk telling me (usually in a fearful tone) that I *had to have* that particular food. (And here, one could substitute whatever impulse food comes to mind.)

So, I decided to try to ‘Substitute’ something healthy that I already had at home for that impulse food – knowing that just stopping in a store (when in this ‘impulse state’) – would most likely yield the binging on any food that caught my eye & fancy in there – possibly in addition to whatever took me in there in the first place.

So I experimented. The first time I thought “[insert name of food here]” – I attempted to substitute “tomato & spinach salad” (which I had at home) – and the result was not what I was looking for. Instead of *replacing* the impulse food mantra – now the voice in my head was *screaming* for it – as if to drown out any thoughts to the contrary (as it, no doubt, does whenever I think I’d be healthier without it.) My well-developed habit pattern of compulsive behavior was not about to be fooled by this. Been there. Done that. Doesn’t work. Don’t even try, give me a break! Don’t bother.

I still felt that substituting the mental image & internal talk was the way to go, but this particular approach to that didn't seem to work. Why not?

Then, I remembered about the Suicide Prevention Hotline. When I was in college at Duke University, many psych majors would volunteer for one of the help hotlines offered by the school. These were mostly student run – but with advisors & professionals overseeing & offering helpful information, guidance. Most of the students who called into the Suicide Hotline were not going to commit suicide and really just needed to talk & have someone listen, to not feel so all alone. But, needless to say, there were some who were seriously contemplating suicide. So how do we mere psychology students (18-22years old) know which was which?

Well, I remembered that the volunteers were told to ask for certain information (including do they have the means & intent to do something) – but first & foremost, to ask the caller *how* he/she intended to commit suicide. If the caller said something like, “I don't know....but I'm gonna do it!” – chances were good that they just needed to talk, connect & maybe be guided to other support services. If the caller said something like, “Well, at 7:15pm I know that everyone will be gone, so I'll go down to the kitchen & get that really sharp knife in the drawer to the left of the sink. Then I'll go upstairs & into the bathroom & lock the door....” Etc. – there was a very high probability that this person could carry out their suicide threat. (Then the volunteer would go into more of a ‘crisis mode’ – taking other stronger steps to help prevent this event.) \*

In other words, the more *detailed & thought-out the plan – the higher the probability that the planned action would take place.* Interesting.

I then reflected on my compulsive behaviors with food, and sure enough, when I thought about it, I realized that I did indeed have a step-by-step plan in my head to get it. I hadn't quite been aware of that before (and tuning into mental visual imagery was quite helpful for this.) When I looked, I not only saw the food I wanted, but saw the store, the aisle, saw myself buying it, consuming it – even saw the eventual guilt and/or purge – as if that was just another part of my plan. In fact, once this plan ‘took hold’ – I felt helpless to stop it. As if it were inevitable. I resigned myself to it.

SO, I went back to my ‘substitution strategy’ and amended it to factor in the importance of the step-by-step plan for a behavior that I wanted to manifest. I started to experiment with replacing the “I'm going to get \_\_\_\_\_” step-by-step plan, with an alternate step-by-step plan – complete with speaking it to myself – either in my mind or out loud. So, the moment the image of [insert impulse food]

came to my mind – even before the ‘plan’ materialized – I’d visualize driving up to my home (and narrate this to myself in my head like: “I’ll park in front, check my mail, maybe I’ll have a check there, I’ll go up the steps (& notice if the flowering plant needs watering.) Then I’ll go in the door, turn on the computer and check my email. I’ll go into the kitchen & get that big fresh beefsteak tomatoes & the fresh lettuce in the fridge. I’ll add some walnuts for fun and try out that new salad dressing that’s supposed to be so good.” Or it doesn’t even have to involve eating – and often that’s an even more effective strategy.

The first time I tried this, it worked. I could hardly believe it. It felt so strange to not feel pulled to the activity I had ‘wanted’ to do, (but any subtle discomfort at an unfamiliar experience was quickly replaced by the ease, relief & sometimes celebration at the healthy behavior.) It’s like there was no room in my consciousness to even consider the old-habit behavior. The step-by-step plan (of the new behavior) took up all the space. Also, as I incorporated moment-to-moment mindfulness to the substituted experience as it unfolded, I found my body giving me pleasurable feedback – which reinforced this way of working.

I experimented with this process for about 2 months. I found that 25-75% of the times that I might normally indulge in food I didn’t need and/or was unhealthful – I successfully substituted other behavior for it. That’s a wide margin, but it was often the deciding factor in my not feeding an old behavior habit pattern – which is key to dissolving it – i.e. starving it to death, forgive the pun. (Also, just to note, the substituting behavior does not have to relate to food at all. Lately I find that checking email can sometimes be an effective replacement for many of my clients, but you can find whatever task works for you.)

\*I do want to note here, that one thing that seemed key for me – was the *immediate* adopting of this strategy – the *first moment* the image of the compulsive behavior food came to mind. The *timing* was key, and *the earlier I came in with this substitution, the more effective it was.* The longer I played out the familiar fantasy, the harder it was to effectively substitute a healthier plan for the harmful one.

So, like homeopathy – or occillococcinum which is useless if not taken at first signs of flu – shifting your focus to this alternate step-by-step game plan at the *first sign or symptom* – the *first moment* that image of (...) food arose, seemed key to successfully replacing the behavior.

This does involve development of the muscles of awareness & the ability to tune into that ‘image gate’ – so that the image doesn’t come through unnoticed (leading to unconscious motivation & distortion of perception & behavior.)

To develop these muscles one could participate in activities like meditation, particularly mindfulness meditation, where the focus is on your subjective experience, and especially mindfulness techniques as taught by Shinzen Young. He has developed formulas – that are logical & scientific & mathematical and the most efficient use of energy & effort towards this process of understanding ourselves & how we get in the way of our own enlightenment – and experiencing freedom. He also clarifies how the thinking process breaks down into mental pictures & internal talk and helps you develop sensory clarity for those two components – thus making the ‘tuning into the images’ of the step-by-step plan of unhealthy behavior – much easier to detect.

So, assuming you have the ability to notice when that image arises,  
And can think in the moment to shift *before that whole thought takes hold*.

The strategy is:

to come in with the substitution *as quickly* as possible, and then thinking (and maybe even speaking out loud) a *step-by-step game plan* of another activity.

I started sharing this strategy with our Mindful Eating Support Group, and also when on retreat during the eating meditations. What was interesting to me was that just my telling how I came up with the strategy – tended to excite these women (& some men.) Now if you’re reading this, you will probably understand how the majority of people working with this issue are usually depressed, angry, desperate, in despair. They know they’re dealing with a complicated issue that is leaving them feeling powerless, and a new strategy usually evokes skepticism (maybe a hopeless hope) more than excitement.

This is a generalization, but always at least a little bit accurate. It’s the nature of the beast.

But, as I listened to their feedback to my initial introduction of the idea of the strategy, I realized that the suicide hotline info was what was really peaking their interest. More than one woman said, “This *is* suicide! What we do – to our bodies

with this behavior – IS like suicide! It is suicide.” Others sat there with open eyes & mouths, for the first time considering this aspect to their experience.

And while most of them then admitted to also experiencing a step-by-step (unstoppable) plan to eat compulsively, none had ever considered substituting another step-by-step plan.

(Another analogy I used was that it’s rarely helpful to have a fighting match with a 2 year old. If you want a 2 year old to give you something he/she has in one hand, you put something else in the other hand – which draws their attention and they usually give up the previously coveted object as they now explore the new one. So here, we’re substituting one step-by-step plan for another.)

At the time I’m writing this, I’ve shared this with a few hundred people and with mixed results. It’s not a ‘sure cure’ and I do not believe there is one for compulsive eating. There are just too many complexities involved, but it’s a potential tool that could be effective, and so I do encourage people to just try it if it comes to mind.

I also try to get people to tune into their ‘sequence’ (see article on ‘sequence’) – i.e. if there are times that cravings always tend to arrive, like in the car, late at night, etc. I’ll even have people put stickem at certain places to remind them to try it.

Now, as with all strategies, this may not be a ‘permanent fix’ – but what I’m attempting with this –as with other strategies – is to get the thoughts & feelings out of the way (even if just for a while) that get in the way of our natural healthiness. Giving the body/mind/spirit a chance to form new pathways, to ‘re-record the tape’ so to speak. Sometimes just having a break from the habitual screaming voice in the head is the window or opening we need to experience a new/different option. And should that option *feel good*, there’s the beginning of a positive feedback loop that could reinforce the healthy behavior.

*This is just one of a series of articles (that are part of a larger book on the topic) that address specific strategies that I have personally developed through experimentation that could be used when dealing with compulsive behaviors – especially around food & eating.*

*Stay tuned for other that may be posted here – but please see earlier ones that include adding Kindness, Compassion, Relaxation & other mindfulness techniques.*