

Done with Dieting Podcast #52: Is Sugar Addictive?



Full Episode Transcript

With your Host
Elizabeth Sherman

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When we have a lack of sleep, we feel that sluggishness, we have the low energy, we don't feel like doing anything. And the brain knows that the quickest way to get energy is to eat something sweet, eat something carby.

And so, we do it, we eat the pretzels, or we eat the chocolate, or we eat the cookies, or the brownies, or whatever it is. For many of us, we start this habit loop because maybe we go through a spell of not sleeping well. And then, we continue it because it's now an established habit. Because the brain likes having sugar. Right? We like eating these things.

And so, it's easy to get into this habit of eating the sugar at three o'clock because we've done it for a few days. And now, the brain is like, oh, well, even though we had really good sleep last night, I still want some sugar. And so, it's totally normal that this happens and then we continue doing it.

You are listening to the done with dieting podcast. The podcast for women in midlife, who are done with dieting, but still want to lose weight and feel good in your clothes. You know that diets don't work long term. But you feel like there's this secret that everyone else knows that you just haven't figured it out yet.

I am your host, Elizabeth Sherman. And I've helped hundreds of women get off the diet roller coaster change their relationship with food, exercise, and their bodies. Through this podcast, my goal is to help you too.

Welcome. Let's get started.

Hey everyone, welcome to episode number 52 of the done with dieting podcast. I am your host, Elizabeth Sherman. And today, we are talking about sugar addiction. We hear it all the time, don't we? That sugar is addictive or that sugar is just as addictive as cocaine is.

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In fact, I've been having this conversation with so many of my clients lately, where they talk about how there's a slippery slope, right? We use that term, this slippery slope of eating cookies, or eating flour, or anything like that.

And especially, since we just got done with the holidays, and so many people are trying to cut back and finding it really difficult because we've been letting ourselves indulge a little bit in cookies. And where we normally wouldn't do that because it's the holidays, because we don't get these cookies and these treats and all of these delicious things year round.

We've allowed ourselves to take part in them. And I think that that's absolutely fine and a great idea. But what's happening is that so many of us are now finding it really difficult to wean ourselves off of it. And so, we're feeling those cravings that are popping up. We're feeling our brain go to that area of, "oh, I should have a cookie." Right?

And when we do that, we feel these incredible urges. And so, it feels like, "sugar is addictive." And I hear this all the time also that sugar is the devil. And so, one of the questions that many of my clients have is like, what is the deal here? Is this something that I'm going to have to deal with for the rest of my life?

And so, I think first of all, it's really important to acknowledge that for many of us, many women over the age of 45, our bodies become so much more sensitive to not only stress, but also insulin. And when we eat cookies, when we eat treats, when we eat sugar, what happens in the body is we eat that the stomach breaks down the food that we eat, and it passes it through the stomach lining and into our bloodstream. And what's going through our bloodstream is glucose. Okay? So, sugar.

And sugar is our body's energy source. And so, what happens then is the body releases a hormone called insulin and insulin then goes out into the bloodstream, and it gathers

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up all of the glucose molecules and it puts the glucose molecules into our muscles and into our liver where we can then use that glucose as stored energy.

Now, if we haven't used up all of the energy in our muscles and in our liver, if there isn't any more storage, then what our body does is it takes the leftover glucose molecules and it converts it into fat. Okay. And so, when we eat cookies, eating cookies isn't necessarily a bad thing.

But eating more cookies than our body can store. Right? Eating more cookies than our body can store, then allows us to put on excess fat. All right? So just being aware of what's happening there when we eat simple carbohydrates or even complex carbohydrates. That if we eat more than our body has the capacity to store, or use as energy, then what happens is we gained fat.

Now, what's really interesting about that is that some of us feel like after we eat cookies, we feel that euphoria that we get, that dopamine hit, that serotonin kicks in, that feel good hormone, that we get when we have sugar. And then, what happens is a little while later, we feel sluggish, right? All of the energy drops out.

And so, what's that about? What tends to happen is as I mentioned, our body processes, cookies, and simple carbohydrates, into glucose, so it then goes into our bloodstream. And then, our body releases insulin in response to that. And the insulin then, cleans up all of that blood glucose, right? That blood sugar.

Now, sometimes the insulin does a little bit too good of a job in cleaning up the blood sugar. And so, what happens then is that we end up getting low blood sugar. Because we don't have any, it's all been stored into our muscles, and into our liver, and then also into fat.

And so then, we feel sluggish, and we want some energy. And so then, we eat more, and the cycle continues. But remember that at this point, our muscles and our liver are

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already full of glycogen from a few hours ago. And so then, in the second wave, what happens is our body doesn't have anywhere to put it but to keep putting it into our fat stores.

And this is what a lot of us don't want. Right? We want to enjoy cookies; we don't want to suffer the negative consequences of eating the cookies. Right? Which is the additional weight gain. We want to feel good in our clothes. And when we store too much fat then, well, we don't. Right? We start to feel a little snug in our clothes.

I want to come back to that in a little bit and talk a little bit about how we get out of that habit. But for right now, I think that where I want to start this episode really is with the question that many of us ask which is why do I reach for the sweet stuff in the first place? And I think that there are a couple different reasons why we do that.

So, the first one is the habit loop, right? So many of us are operating on habit. And when the holiday started, right? We started making cookies because it's what we do in the holidays. When we start making cookies and all of those sweet treats that is actually, a habit too. Granted, we haven't done it for a year.

But when we hear Christmas carols, when we are cleaning up after Thanksgiving, and we're buying presents, it just goes with the entire process. And it's something that we may experience only seasonally, but we still experience it. And when that habit has been part of our experience for many years, many of us for over 50 years, then it automatically kicks in.

Now, does it take another 50 years to get out of that habit? Absolutely not. But let's talk about the habit loop for just a second. , the habit loop is comprised of three different parts. The first part is what we call the cue. And this is what sets the habit loop in motion. It could be a bunch of things.

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What the cue could be is maybe the time of day. It could be a series of events. Like I mentioned earlier, it could be just hearing something from your childhood. It could be a smell. It could be an emotional state. Right? It could be that we're happy. And so, when we're happy, we want to enjoy cookies, right? Or it could be that we're sad or we're bored, and we want to enjoy cookies. Right?

Whatever it is that whenever we consistently have that same set of circumstances that are wired together, then fire together. And so, what that means is that when we do the same thing over and over and over again, our brain will automatically then start to do that on repeat. We don't even have to think about it. , we really want to be aware of what the cue is when we are trying to break a habit.

Now, once we experienced the cue, then the next part is the routine. And for us in the context of what we're talking about today, the routine is eating cookies, or eating sugar, or drinking coffee, or having something sweet. So many of us will have something sweet around three o'clock in the afternoon, and we just can't stop ourselves.

And then, finally, the third part to the habit loop is the reward. And the reward is the pay off or what we get out of doing it. And so, when we perform the action, what actually feels good about it? And so, first, many of us, when we eat the cookies, the cookies taste good, of course. And so, that's the reward.

We also get a dopamine hit in our brain. And the dopamine is like a brain chemical, right? And it makes us feel good. So, not only does the cookie taste good, but we also get this dopamine, this high from eating the cookie.

For some of us, when we are trying to avoid negative feelings, eating the cookie or eating will help us avoid feeling the negative feelings. Because we're getting the dopamine, right? We are feeling something different than how we want to feel. And then, also we

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get a rush of energy from eating, right? And so, of course, all of these things, the body knows are feel good.

Now, the body doesn't care about not being able to fit into our jeans. The body only cares, the lower brain only knows that what is going to make it feel good in the moment. It's only interested in instant gratification. And so, when we eat the cookies, we're getting instant gratification. We are encouraging that instant gratification that we get from eating the cookies.

Now, here's what's really interesting is we can start a habit for one reason, but then continue it for a completely different reason. So, earlier I mentioned about many of us have that three o'clock sugar craving. Right? And so, one of the reasons that we get that three o'clock craving is because sometimes we have a lack of sleep.

And when we get a lack of sleep, our body's cells actually do not process energy correctly. When we don't get proper sleep, ourselves just don't regenerate. And so, one of the consequences to our cells not regenerating properly is that it doesn't make energy correctly.

And so, when we are at a lack of energy, right? We're having a lack of concentration in the afternoon, because our brain does use glucose in the process of thinking. We do think and therefore use calories. Okay, so that's a good thing about thinking.

But when we have a lack of sleep, we feel that sluggishness, we have the low energy, we don't feel like doing anything. And the brain knows that the quickest way to get energy is to eat something sweet, eat something carby.

And so, we do it, we eat the pretzels, or we eat the chocolate, or we eat the cookies, or the brownies, or whatever it is. For many of us, we start this habit loop because maybe we go through a spell of not sleeping well. And then, we continue it because it's now an established habit. Because the brain likes having sugar. Right? We like eating these things.

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And so, it's easy to get into this habit of eating the sugar at three o'clock because we've done it for a few days. And now, the brain is like, oh, well, even though we had really good sleep last night, I still want some sugar. And so, it's totally normal that this happens and then we continue doing it.

Now, many of my clients will say that sugar is a slippery slope. And so, the question comes up of how much is too much. Now, I started this podcast talking about how women over the age of 45 become more sensitive to insulin and we also become more sensitive to stress.

And so, when we're talking about this slippery slope of eating too much sugar or eating too many carbohydrates. What if the slippery slope is just your body's hormonal response to eating too much of the wrong foods.

And so, when I work with my clients, one of the things that we focus on is what's called listening to your body. We talk about listening to your body's not only hunger queues, but also our emotional state. How do different emotions feel in the body? And what is my body feeling at any given time of the day?

And when we really dial into the right set of habits for us. So, eating the number of vegetables that our body needs. Drinking enough water. Moving as much as the body needs it to. And really getting enough sleep. Then, what happens is we feel really amazing.

And so, the second layer or version two of listening to your body is starting to notice, when we start getting a little moody, when we start getting a little bit low in energy, when we start having cravings, when our appetite kicks up. And these are what I call biomarkers.

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And if you're interested in learning more about those biomarkers, in episode 36 titled managing menopause, I do talk a lot more about those biomarkers and how to manage them so that you feel a lot better.

But when we are listening to our body, we start to notice how those subtle queues, the way that our body communicates with us and tells us that things are a little off, that we need to pay attention to.

And there's something that I help my clients establish, which is what I call the starch tipping point. And what the starch tipping point is, and it also applies to sugar and all of the other things that we eat. Which is the amount of starch or sugar that we can have in our diet and not suffer any negative consequences to that.

And so, there's an amount of starch or cookies that we can eat on a daily basis or maybe a weekly basis. Everyone's completely different in terms of how much they can eat and how often. But one of the things that we want to figure out for each of us is how much we can eat or drink without that negatively affecting us. And having this slippery slope where we all of a sudden feel like we are out of control with our cravings, right? Because none of us want to feel like food has power over us.

And so, once we get out of the habit of eating these foods, then how do we maintain it and how do we ride that little edge of having some in our diet, but not too much. Because that's really what we all want to know. Right? None of us want to cut sugar out completely from our diets.

The only time we really want to do that is if there's some sort of problem or negative health consequence where I can't have any in my diet. Maybe diabetes, gluten intolerance, or something like that where we don't want to cut it out completely because we want to be able to enjoy those things with , our friends, and our family.

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But we want to be able to still have a sense of control and feel good about our bodies when we are eating these foods.

And so, some of the symptoms of really feeling like you're addicted to sugar could be cravings. And this can actually, not just stop at sugar. So, craving more sugar for sure is going to be one of the symptoms. But also having it transfer over into other simple carby types of foods. And so, when I was talking about dopamine earlier, before we became an industrialized society, we were hunters and gatherers, right?

And so, our brains and our bodies haven't caught up evolutionarily with our technology. And so, when we were hunters and gatherers, we would find a strawberry for example, in a patch. We would be walking along, and we would find a strawberry, and we would eat the strawberry, and immediately, the brain would get the dopamine hit and it would light up. And we would remember, oh, this food has calories. This food is good for us. We need to eat this more.

And so, that's how the body knew that the strawberry was good for us and a good source of calories. But as we've become more industrialized as a society, we've become a little bit more sedentary, right?

And we have machinery that actually makes and brings food to us. And not only that, but we figure it out as a society, how to extract the sugar from the strawberry, and condense it down, and we make cane sugar, right? And we make processed sugar and refined sugar.

Now, because that refined sugar is so different than the strawberry. Because the strawberry has vitamins and minerals and some fiber in it, as well as a bunch of water. That is completely different from a hormonal experience of eating the strawberry as eating refined sugar.

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So, a lot of times when clients come to me, they're like, oh, I know that sugar in any form is bad, right? That we think that sugar from fruit is bad as well as sugar that we see on the table. But the sugar on the table, the refined sugar is way more condensed.

And so, the amount like having one teaspoon of refined sugar is going to light up our dopamine receptors a hundred times more. And so, what happens then is that now the strawberry doesn't give us the kick that it used to. Once we've introduced refined sugar into our palate, our brains, like, oh, that is so much better than that strawberry. Right?

Have you ever seen a child eat ice cream for the very first time a baby? It's like, oh my God, this taste is the best thing ever. Right? It's so delightful to see a baby eating ice cream for the very first time because they're just so lit up.

And so, when we have this sugar addiction, it will transfer over into carby or flour type of foods as well, because just like I was talking about the strawberry is to refined sugar, a grain of wheat is to ground flour.

So, evolutionarily, if we were to eat wheat, or rice, or anything that is whole grain. And then, we grind it down into a flour, into a powder. When we eat foods that are made from flour, our brain will also get that dopamine hit because it's concentrated.

And so, what we really want to do is we want to break that relationship that our brain has with the flour, with the processed sugar so that we can feel in control around it again. Because if you've ever cut sugar and flour out of your diet before, you will know that you stop craving it.

Some of the other symptoms of having sugar addiction are also hiding treats, or hiding yourself eating treats, needing more and more to satisfy. So, again, going back to the flour and the refined sugar and needing those. And then, also eating them even when we're not hungry.

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But then the other symptom that we may find in noticing our sugar addiction is using those foods to buffer or numb our emotions, like I was talking about before.

Now, some of the other symptoms that we may find when we are eating too much sugar and or flour might be acid reflux, irritable bowel syndrome, having fatigues, having headaches or migraines, having an excess amount of anxiety and stress, joint pain, and also rashes on our skin. So, just be aware that there could be other ways that this addiction plays out on your body.

Now, the next question you might be asking yourself is, okay, so what do I do if I want to get rid of this? And I think for many of us, and you may have experienced this already when starting the new year, if you were like, okay, this is it. I'm just going to get rid of all of the sugar out of my diet.

You may not want to go cold Turkey on this because symptoms of withdrawal of sugar and flour feel terrible. And it can feel terrible anywhere from a few days to actually up to two or three weeks. And some of the symptoms of having sugar withdrawal are fatigue, and headache, feeling sluggishness, and muscle pain, and nausea. Almost like, you have the flu.

And so, you can go through that, but you might not have to. And so, one of the things that you may want to do is identify what are all of the different triggers, when is it that you actually reach for the sugar.

And when you can identify those different points in the day, or in the week, or whatever your habits are. So, identifying each of the different habit loops of when you reach for sugar. What you want to do is then systematically, go through each one of those and dismantle each habit loop.

So many of us want to get rid of all of them, but then what happens is we feel like a failure if one of them creeps in and we didn't identify it. And so, just be aware that when

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we are measuring progress, the way that we measure progress is not necessarily through adopting the new behavior but limiting the behavior that we don't want.

What we want to do is so many of us see success in performing the better behavior which would be resisting the sugar, which would be resisting the flour. But for many of us, what we should be looking at instead is not performing the new behavior but how often we are not performing the negative behavior. Okay?

So, that's the first thing is identify triggers and systematically reduce each one. Next is some people will ask about artificial sweeteners. Now, this is a really good question because when we want to stop eating sugar, we'll often think of, okay, so I'm going to drink diet Coke instead of regular Coke, or I'm going to have sugar-free gum instead of regular gum.

And that can actually be really helpful when it comes to reducing our sugar intake. However, be aware that it doesn't necessarily change the habit loop. It doesn't change the craving for the sweet. And so, using artificial sweeteners, or sugar alcohols, or anything like that can actually be helpful in reducing the number of calories that we're taking in.

However, it doesn't necessarily change the habit loop and our desire for something sweet. And so, just be aware that if you're going to switch to artificial sweeteners, that's fine. But you may find yourself back in this situation where you're still craving sweets and you're giving into sugar more frequently. Because we haven't really down-regulated that dopamine receptor in the brain.

Another technique that you can use is avoid drinking your calories. So, avoid flavored coffees that have sugar in them. Sometimes if you're having a smoothies with a honey or agave nectar, those can also add to the sweetness. So, just be aware that we really want to avoid drinking your calories, avoid drinking sodas, and things like that.

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The other thing that we can do though is we can increase the amount of water we're drinking; we can increase the number of vegetables that we're eating, increase our protein, increase the amount of activity that we're doing on a regular basis.

So, using up that the energy that our body has stored over the past month by walking or by doing other types of easy exercise like, gardening, or shoveling, or things like that. Just be more active and yeah, just move around more, and that will for sure, help you to feel better and get rid of that sluggishness.

And then finally, the other thing that you can increase is your sleep. And this may go hand in hand with your reduction of sugar. That the less sugar you take, you might find that you actually sleep better. Okay?

And finally, the last thing that we want to do is that we want to decrease our stress. Now, one thing that we can also do is we can retrain our taste buds to down-regulate the dopamine hit. And so, what we want to do there is we want to pick foods that don't have added sugars.

So, things like, if you look at the nutritional label, look for things not just sugar, but also things like sucrose in them, or glucose, Gavi nectar, brown rice syrup, high fructose corn syrup, dextrose, anything with OSE in the end is a sugar. Evaporated cane juice is also a sugar, glucose, lactose, malt syrup, molasses, and sucrose. Those are all things that are sugar that are going to make us crave more sugar.

And so, what we want to do is we want to be able to identify all of those hidden sugars in the foods that we're eating. And be aware that you're going to find them once you start looking at nutritional labels, you're going to find these sugars in many of the foods that you eat. Things like bread and ketchup, things that don't even really feel sweet, barbecue sauce, salad dressing, flavored coffee, and again, pasta sauce. So, all of these things are going to add up to sugar in your diet.

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So, earlier, I was talking about our insulin and our blood sugar. And so, be aware that when we eat cookies by themselves, our blood sugar will spike that releases the insulin and then our blood sugar falls. And then, we go through that sluggishness, and then we want to eat again, and then we eat the cookie, and then our blood sugar spikes. And we just keep going through this whole process.

One of the keys to feeling good and managing our weight is actually managing our blood sugar. And so, how we want to do that is first of all, you don't want to eat a large amount of sugar in one sitting. So, you want to be able to give your body time to absorb it.

But also like I was talking about with the strawberry. When we eat fruit, fruit has fiber in it. And it also has vitamins and minerals in it. So, those things are good. Don't be afraid of fruit, especially when it comes to sugar.

Now, in general, we want to eat less of tropical fruits. And so, tropical fruits tend to have more sugar in them. But things like strawberries, apples, blueberries, and pears tend to be a little bit more higher in water content, higher in fiber. And so, therefore, they're good, they're going to slow the absorption of that sugar into our bloodstream.

But the other thing that we want to do, if we do want to have sugar, if we do want to fruit is we want to eat that with protein. So, making sure that you're eating some sort of protein with it. That's also going to slow the absorption of that sugar into your bloodstream.

And eating sugar after a strenuous workout, after a strength training workout, or a long run is actually a really great time to have sugar, whether it's fruit or whether it's cookies. Because what is happening then is with exercise, our body is using up all of that stored glucose. And so, therefore, if we're going to replenish it, then is a really good time because our muscles are going to be receptive to it.

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The last suggestion that I have in terms of what is the solution if we do feel addicted, is it really just making better sweet choices. And so, just being aware of what those sweet choices are.

And if this is really important to you and you want to down-regulate that dopamine and really get your body off of sugar. I am going to invite you to join the Feel Good Sisterhood.

Enrollment is going to open for the Feel Good Sisterhood at the end of January, if you're listening to this live. So, at the end of January, enrollment is going to open for the Feel Good Sisterhood. And I'm going to invite you to get on the wait list now. So, all you need to do is go to elizabethsherman.com/groupcoaching, that's all one word.

And you can find out more about Feel Good Sisterhood. What it is, is it's a six month program where you will learn all of the nutritional basics. Not only that, but you'll also learn all of the mindset shifts that we need to make in order to have a good relationship with food. Have a good relationship with our body and with ourselves, so that we never have to go through this process again.

You're going to learn all of the tools and techniques that I teach my clients. All of the ways that we learn how to listen to our body, all of those little subtle signs that our body sends us that says, Hey, I like the way that we're eating, and this is how I feel good. And oh, you know what? We really overdid it the other night and now we feel not so good.

So, all of those biomarkers that I was talking about in episode number 36, managing menopause, as well as on this podcast episode. What we can do is we can figure out how to really get that starch tipping point where we enjoy the cookie, but we don't feel like we have to eat five.

You wouldn't believe the number of clients that are currently in the program who were like, "you know what? I just don't overeat sugar like I used to." It's mind boggling, how

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good this program is. So, if this is something that's on your to-do list for 2022, I am going to highly recommend that you check out the Feel Good Sisterhood.

Again, enrollment is opening in the next few weeks. And so, I would love to have you join. And if you just have a question about it, feel free to reach out to me. You can find me on Facebook, or Instagram, or you can find me on my website at elizabethsherman.com.

So, that's all I have for you today. Have an amazing week everyone, and I will talk to you later. Bye-bye.

Hey, if you enjoy listening to this podcast, you have to come check out the Feel Good Sisterhood. It's my small group coaching program where we take all this material, and we apply it. We figure out what works for us, and we don't ever look at another diet ever again.

Join me over at elizabethsherman.com/groupcoaching. I'd love to have you join me in the Feel Good Sisterhood.

See you there.