



Focus Healthcare of Tennessee  
An Alcohol and Drug Abuse Treatment Center  
A Center for Eating Disorders

## The Red Herring Food is Not the Issue.

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- Page 1 -

When we struggle with disordered eating is often difficult to believe that food is not the issue that is causing us grief. Certainly our struggle appears to be centered around what we are doing (eating compulsively, bingeing, and purging) or not doing (starving) with food. It seems as though, whether we are dieting or caught up in a binge, all we can think about is food.

Someone struggling with anorexia may deny her hunger and not eat, but she is secretly obsessed with food and fat. She spends much of her day counting calories, weighing herself, exercising excessively, preparing food for others, and thinking about the foods she didn't eat. Compulsive eaters find themselves thinking about the foods they are not supposed to be eating and scolding themselves for what they did eat and for how fat they look. Those who are caught up in the binge-purge-process of bulimia spend enormous amounts of time planning and preparing for their binge and worrying about how they will be able to purge in secret. For concerned family members and friends who are witnessing this, all the evidence of an eating disorder points to food. And yet food is not the real issue. It is a smoke screen. It is the red herring.

A "red herring" describes something designed to confuse or divert attention from something else. Let's say you are following a whodunit and the question is "Who killed the old lady? Was it the maid, the butler, or the chauffeur?" As you are following the mystery along everyone is watching the maid because she was around the old lady the most and had been acting suspiciously. At the end of the story, there's a twist and it turns out not to have been the maid who committed the murder, but the butler, who no one suspected because they were busy scrutinizing the maid. The maid is the red herring. She's the distracter.

With disordered eating, food becomes the red herring. It can distract those struggling with an eating disorder as well as concerned family members and friends and even professionals who are trying to help. When we focus on what someone is doing with food we fail to see what the real culprit is. We

become caught up in illusions that cause us to stray from the path of recovery, because we start looking for solutions in all the wrong places.

This old English fairy tale is about a girl who longed to touch the stars in the sky.

Every evening, just before falling asleep at night, she would lie in her bed and gaze out at the stars through her bedroom window on clear nights she would be delighted to see them twinkling ever so brightly. Other nights she would watch them play high and seek with the clouds. On stormy nights they wouldn't show their faces even though she suspected they were still behind the clouds.

One warm summer evening when the moon was full, the girl decided to satisfy her yearning and set out in search of the stars. She walked and walked until she came to a smooth, glassy pond. "Good evening." The girl said. "I'm off to find the stars in the sky. Can you tell me how to reach them?"

"They're right here in my face," Replied the pond. "Jump in and catch them."

The girl looked at the stars glistening in the pond and jumped right in, her hands cupped so that she might catch one. But not a star did she find.

She went on her way until she came to a bubbling brook. "Good evening," Said the girl. "I'm off to find the stars in the sky. Can you help me?"

"Oh, yes," answered the brook. " They are always here, dancing in the water between the stones. Come on in and catch them."

So the girl waded into the brook, with her hands cupped so she could scoop them up. But not a star did she find.

"I don't think the stars are really here!" the girl cried in dismay.

"Well, they look like they are here, and that's just the same thing," said the brook.

"No, it's not," insisted the girl.

She continued on her way until she encountered a group of fairies dancing on a hill. "Good evening," said the girl as she approached the wee folk. "I'm off to find she stars in the sky. Can you help me?"

"They are right here, in the dew on the grass where we are dancing. Come and dance with us and you will catch one."

So the girl danced and danced with the ring of fairies, swooping down with her hands, trying to scoop up some stars. But not a star did she find. In frustration, she sat on a mossy stump and said to the fairies as they whirled by, "I've searched and searched for the stars but I cannot find them. Can't you help me?"

One of the fairies began to dance around her, and with a high sweet voice said. "Since you are so determined to find the stars, I will tell you how to reach them: If you will not go backward, then go forward. Be sure to take the right road. Ask Four-Feet to carry you to No-feet, who will carry you to the Stairs Without Steps. If you can climb them, you will reach the stars."

The girl quickly stood up and began to go forward, making sure she was on the right road. She came to a horse grazing underneath a tree. "Good evening," she said. "I'm off to find the stars in the sky. Can you carry me there?"

"I don't know the whereabouts of the stars in the sky," said the horse. "My purpose is to serve the fairies."

"I was just dancing with them," said the girl, "and they told me to ask Four-Feet to carry me to No-Feet."

"Well, I am Four-Feet, and if the fairies say I am to take you to No-Feet, then climb on my back and off we'll go," said the horse.

The girl rode and rode until they came to the end of the land where the sea stretched out in front of them as far as the horizon. Way off in the distance was a ribbon of brilliant colors that arched up into the sky.

The girl slid off the horse's back and stood at the water's edge. A very large fish swam up to her. Good evening said the girl. "I'm looking for the Stairs Without Steps. Can you take me there?"

"I am not available to serve anyone who asks. I am only to do the bidding of the fairies," replied the fish.

"I was just dancing with them and was told to ride Four-Feet who would carry me to No-Feet who would carry me to the Stairs without Steps."

"Well in that case, hop on my back. I am No-Feet, and I will carry you to the Stairs Without Steps," said the fish.

Off they went, the girl holding tightly to the fish's back until they reached the horizon where the brilliant colors arched high up into the sky. "Here they are," said the fish. "Be careful as you go up.

They are not easy to climb.”

The girl slid off the fish’s back and began to climb the bright arch of many colors. The fish was right. They were not easy to climb. But she moved slowly and cautiously, inching her way along. As she became weary she would occasionally lose her grip and slip backwards. It was cold and she was surrounded by darkness, but she pressed on until she reached the top of the arch where she was surrounded by the brilliant light. At last! There they were- the stars in the sky! She reached out with her hand to touch one of the shimmering stars. As she reached farther and farther, she suddenly lost her balance, and with a sigh that was half regret, half contentment, she fell, slipping and sliding, faster and faster into the darkness below.

When she opened her eyes, it was morning and she found herself in her bed. “I did reach the stars, didn’t I” she wondered. “Or did I only dream it?”

Then she looked at her hand that was still tightly clenched into a fist, and as she slowly opened it, she saw a speck of stardust.

Breaking free from struggles with food, fat and dieting can seem as impossible as reaching for the stars. This story tells us that if you want to reach your dream you must not spend much time chasing an illusion. While the girl was initially fooled by the reflection of the stars on the pond, in the brook, in the dew, she soon recognized that the reflection was not the same as the stars themselves. Problems with food are simply reflections of the real issues we struggle with. It is important to recognize that food is not the problem itself.

If I am obsessing with food, fat, and dieting, what I am doing with food is distracting me from the real issues I struggle with in my life. As horrible as feeling fat is, as painful as it is to struggle with feeling fat, focusing on feeling fat gives me something tangible, gives some definition to troubled feelings that may seem unresolvable. It seems to be a way, literally and figuratively, to “put my finger on” the source of the problem. But like stars in a pond, it is only an illusion.

Think of the “fat attack.” Anyone who has struggled with disordered eating is familiar with fat attacks. A fat attack occurs when you all of a sudden feel extremely fat, as though you’ve just gained twenty pounds overnight. You know, rationally, that you did not actually gain twenty pounds overnight but it sure feels that way. Yesterday you might not have felt terrific, but you felt okay. Today you feel horribly fat. What’s going on?

When you are having a fat attack, this is a signal that something else is going on that is upsetting you. Maybe you are angry at something your mother said, maybe you are nervous about an upcoming date, maybe you are feeling frustrated with a supervisor at work, maybe you are feeling bad about something you said to a friend. If these are things you don’t quite know how to handle comfortably, you may begin to focus intensely on your fat and the original problem will appear to fade

into the background. As bad as it feels to see yourself as fat, at least you know what the solution is: lose weight.

A fat attack is different from generally feeling bad about your weight. It comes on rather suddenly and is very intense. It is not based on reality, even though the feelings that it generates are very real. It seems like the source of your misery, but like the starlight in dewdrops, it is only a reflection of something else that is troubling you.

What if the real problem is that you have a terrible relationship with your mother or you're in a marriage that's intolerable for you, or you hate your job, or you feel lonely even in a room full of people? These are much bigger, more complex issues that can often become overwhelming.

Here's where food comes into the picture. If you starve yourself, all you seem to think about is food. If you binge and purge, you spend much of your time planning your binges and finding the time and place to purge. If you are eating compulsively, you focus on food, food, food. And those other problems, at home, at school, at work, or in relationships, magically seem to disappear.

Coping with the "real problems" requires skills that you may not have, and resolving them may seem like an impossible task, as difficult as climbing a rainbow. When you embark on a journey to uncover and resolve underlying conflicts or feelings, and don't allow yourself to be fooled by any illusions of what is truly troubling you, you may learn something important about the function and purpose of your disordered eating. You may discover how it helps to distract you from the issues in your life that overwhelm you, that you haven't yet learned how to deal with effectively. And you may discover how effectively it distracts you, moment to moment, from the fear of facing things head on, from the pain of past hurts. No wonder it can be so addictive.

The relief you get, however, is only temporary. The disordered eating distracts you only temporarily from the emotional stress you are experiencing. It doesn't do anything to make the stress go away. Although what you are doing with food distracts you from your sadness, your anger, or your fear, it doesn't help to resolve problems. In fact, it helps to make them worse. The stress inside worsens and the disordered eating behavior increases. The real issues never do get resolved.

When we decide to follow our dream of being free from disordered eating, what is required is not just a longing to reach for the stars, but a willingness to go forward on the right path, to not get distracted by the illusion that thinness creates happiness, or be sidetracked by the beliefs that all we need is enough willpower to stick to a diet, that calorie counting is the answer, and that food is the problem.