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Food and Love

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In sharing stories from other people's lives in this book, I have changed their names and some of the details of their stories in order to protect their privacy.

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PART

WHY FOOD AND LOVE?



A Personal Journey

Did you know that certain foods could be harming your relationships? Have you ever considered that your relationships may be harming your health? Both are strong possibilities, and the connection between them is an area that is rarely talked about in relationship education.

Until now.

Through my own personal experience and years of reading and research, I have stumbled onto an amazing connection between two of the most powerful and passionate forces in our lives: eating and loving. In the process I finally understand what is perhaps the only way to make lasting change in either area.

It's the most exciting information I've come across in years.

Although many factors contribute to our emotional, relational, and physical health, very few professionals are commenting on the way eating and relating affect our overall well-being. In dealing with that issue personally, I recognized a connection I hadn't seen or heard discussed before.

Now I have no choice but to share that information with you. Why? Because I believe the material here could quite possibly help you find a new way of eating or a new way of relating. Maybe, like me, you'll lose weight in the process and feel better than ever about your ability to love.

The bottom line is this: If you're like me, the material in this book might give you the breakthrough you've been waiting for.

In the following pages I have the privilege of sharing with you the connection between food and love, and the way it changed my life. This is not a scientific book; rather it is a presentation of personal experiences—both in my own life and in the lives of thousands of people I've surveyed or counseled—along with current research on the topic of food and love.

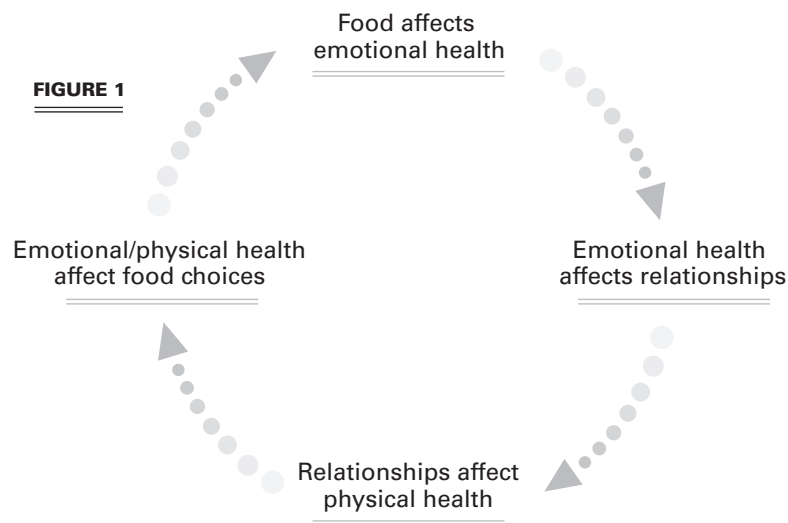
The connection is this:

- Our food choices can affect our emotional health;
- Our emotional health definitely affects our relationships;
- Our relationships affect our physical and emotional health;
- Our emotional and physical health can affect our food choices.

Most of us know that food affects our *physical* health; we see that in the impact food has on conditions like heart disease, blood pressure problems, diabetes, and so many others. We already know that our relationships affect our *emotional* health; we see that in the impact fractured or unstable relationships have on our moods.

But what we haven't explored in detail is the connection between food and love, a connection that takes place when food affects our emotions, our emotions affect our relationships, and our relationships affect our health. That's the connection, the cycle, I want to share with you in this book. For most people this cycle is ongoing and will continue throughout life—positively or negatively.

We can picture the cycle like this (SEE FIGURE 1):



For most of my life, I have made poor food choices because I didn't know any better. I didn't have adequate information. But despite my poor eating habits, I never had much of a weight problem. Then several years ago

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I got caught in the trap of overeating, and I became obsessive about foods—both wanting the wrong kinds and being upset with myself when I ate them.

This, then, affected my moods, making me a little more edgy and sluggish, and those moods strained most of my relationships. That, in turn, affected my physical health. This entire experience caused me stress, and in my attempts to deal with the stress, I ate even more.

I couldn't break the cycle until I recognized the connection and realized that change didn't seem to come through my own willpower. I knew I needed help from somewhere, but I couldn't find the way out of the cycle.

The heart of this book came when I realized that at some point in our lives most of us struggle with these two powerful forces: food and love. Most of us want to be as healthy as possible and to enjoy satisfying relationships. But the majority of us, when we're really honest, fall short in both areas.

We fall short for one of two reasons: Either we lack the knowledge to change, or we lack the willpower. If you struggle in the areas of food and love because you have never known the amazing connection between the two, then this book will give you significant information that could change your life. If you know what you need to do about food but you don't have the willpower to make the necessary changes, then part 6—Steps to Lasting Change—may help you find the strength you've never had before.

Before we get started, let me share with you how the information in this book changed my life.

WHEN I FELL IN LOVE WITH FOOD

As I was growing up, I could eat whatever I wanted and never gain a pound. I could have four sandwiches for lunch. I could eat all day long, and because of a combination of my metabolism and activity level, I burned it off. Weight was never a problem for me.

"Eating like that will catch up to you one day, Gary," friends would say. But it never did, and in my ignorance I thought it never would.

My father had died of a heart attack when he was fifty-eight years old, and my older brother had died of the same thing at age fifty-one. Another brother had undergone triple-bypass surgery. Obviously heart problems run in our family.

I was forty-seven when my older brother died. The relationship he and I shared had become very close, and his death was a terrible shock to my

system. For a while I ate differently—less fat, that kind of thing—because I was concerned about my heart. But then I slipped back into my old ways. My arteries may have been developing serious problems, but I felt healthy and had no motivation to change.

Then I hit my fifty-eighth birthday.

Almost immediately my overeating began expanding my midsection. I would eat two breakfast meals, big lunches, two dinners. Overnight, it seemed, I fell in love with food. I had never loved it before, but I acquired new tastes for different kinds of food, foods that satisfied me in a deep way.

At the same time, circumstances in my career were subtly straining the relationship between my wife, Norma, and me. Looking back, I realize that I may have turned to food as a means of comfort because of that strain. In a sense, food became love for me, my way of feeling good and rewarding myself at the end of a long day.

I rationalized saying, “Oh, I’ll be okay. Before long, I’ll stop this pattern and start losing weight.”

Instead, I kept gaining weight.

My love for food grew, and I began finding more pleasure in eating than ever before. It was as if my poor food choices had affected me emotionally, causing me to direct my feelings away from Norma and the people in my life, and more toward what I ate.

It was a very new experience.

I would hang out at dessert tables, eating until I was far too full, all because I enjoyed the taste and comfort the sweets provided. I found this principle at work: The more I ate, the more I wanted. When I woke up tired and bloated, heavier than the day before, I still wanted more. I craved doughy foods with fats and sugars, and I knew no way to control my appetite. At times I went to bed feeling uneasy and full of self-condemnation because of the things I was eating. But I knew no way to stop.

Without warning, I had the same problem that so many other people do, a problem I once ignorantly thought was easy to handle. But when the problem was mine, I saw the truth: I was completely helpless; there was nothing I could do about it.

A year of living like that humbled me in my attitude toward health and relationships like nothing else could have. I remembered the shameful way I had treated family members and friends who struggled with weight. I sadly admit that I had had very little patience with overweight people. I became frustrated with their lack of self-control. Inwardly I judged them as indul-

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gent people, and I often tried to make them feel guilty, tried to be their conscience, and tried to monitor their food intake. I would keep a close eye on their serving sizes and cast them disgusted looks if they took a piece of dessert at a social gathering. Big mistake!

Back then I tried to make other people change their ways and lose a few pounds. But the truth was, all I ever did in the process was push them away from me, make them doubt my love, and drive them further into a life-style of finding comfort in food.

Once the weight problem was mine, I began to understand a connection between what I ate, how I felt about myself, and the way I treated those around me. I also realized that I was absolutely helpless over my increasing weight problem and declining health. I had neither the desire nor the will-power to stop eating the foods that were harming me. To my wife's credit, she was completely gracious to me, not treating me the way she saw me treat others.

As my battle with food and excess weight raged, it became a war, and I realized that in a few short years it would ultimately kill me. I prayed daily for an answer.

In what seemed like a coincidence at that time, I started reading books about living in God's strength, although I never thought the information I learned would relate to my food choices. The more I read and counseled others, the more I realized that the country is full of people like me—people struggling with eating right and loving right. Could their problems and mine be a result—at least in part—of the connection I was seeing? Could food truly play a part in harming a person's relationships? Could weak relationships really harm a person's physical health? And was it possible that a person's overall health might affect the way that person made food choices?

I believed I had stumbled onto something that might change my life, so I kept praying, researching, and believing God had something he was trying to show me.

RECOGNIZING GOD'S POWER

I continued studying about God's power, and one morning it was as if a lightbulb went off. I thought, Wait a minute! If God's power can help us in every area of our lives, every habit, then his power could save me from overeating. After all, it isn't his will that I overeat, but I can't control it anymore.

Without telling anyone, that October morning I decided I would try an

experiment to see if God's strength could break my cycle of poor eating and poor relating. I had nothing to lose—except weight! I knew that I was out of options other than this last-ditch attempt: to give my struggle to God and seek his best for my life, through his strength alone.

So I got on my knees and cried out to God. I patterned my cry after the passage in Psalms, “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.”¹

Still on my knees, I admitted that I could not control my eating, that I had tried, and that the task was beyond me. My own abilities were not sufficient. I came to God and said, “I can't seem to do this on my own. It's not going to happen through my own efforts.”

I felt as if I were kneeling at the foot of the cross and asking God to free me. Since this was my own personal experiment, I had nothing to lose except my weight.

I had cried out to God this way before, but only about temporary issues or crises. Never had I figured out how desperately I needed God's power to find lifelong victory over an integral part of my life. I still didn't fully understand the connection between food and love. But from that moment on I relaxed and rested in God. I waited on him and said, “You can do this in me anytime you want.” In the meantime, though, I knew I couldn't control my overeating.

This was where my waiting period started.

Since I didn't have power on my own to change my eating habits, what did I do? I kept eating. I never even tried to stop. Daily I said to God, *Father, however you want me to eat, I'm willing to do that. Whatever you want me to learn or do, just show me.* Sometimes I would ask, *Do you want me to read something or talk to someone or meet someone who has an answer for me? Anything you want me to do, just show me. I'll see it as a miracle and an act of your strength in my life.*

He began to make even clearer the definition of his strength in my life. God alone can give us the power to live life fully. That's really it in a few words. So I waited and rested, and rested and waited.

The days wore on, and I continued to say, *God, I'm still out of control here, and if you would heal me today, I would be more than grateful. But I'm just going to wait; I'm not going to chase after a bunch of how-to books or use my energy and efforts to do this on my own. I'm really going to see if this works in my life.*

I know what you're thinking.

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The very volume you're holding is a how-to book. But there's a difference. When you wait on God's strength for victory, you won't have to chase after things to read; God will simply place them in your path. When he does, allow for the fact that a how-to book—perhaps even this one—could possibly provide the breakthrough you're looking for.

For me, the more I prayed, the more convinced I became that God would take care of my eating problem. Soon I wasn't telling God I wanted to see *if* his power worked in this area of my life. Rather I wanted to see *when* it would work. I grew more excited with each passing week.

During that waiting time I recalled other instances in which God's strength was all that pulled me through—even though I hadn't fully recognized the fact at the time. There were days when I would tell God, *You've worked powerfully in my life before, and I know you'll do it again. I just don't know how long it is going to take or how you are actually going to do it.*

I refused to give in to fear.

It's easy for us to worry, but that isn't how God wants us to live when we're in a relationship with him. I reminded myself that the Bible says, "Whatever is good and perfect comes to us from God above, who created all heaven's lights. Unlike them, he never changes or casts shifting shadows."² I told myself that God doesn't sit in heaven and say, "Let's see. How can I make life miserable for Gary Smalley?" In addition I was able to trust that all things work together for the good of those who love God and have been called according to his purpose.³

Basically I decided to be confident that God's will was better than mine. I would rather wait for his power than keep failing by relying on my own strength.

And so I waited.

STILL WAITING

October and November went by, and I kept overeating, kept gaining weight. But I had completely stopped worrying about it. I didn't feel guilty or condemned.

And yes, once in a while I had doubts.

Like every other American, I like things done instantly. As the days wore on, the doubts grew worse.

Looking back now, I know that God used that time to teach me empathy toward people who have difficulty with their weight. I can honestly say I

understand those people so much better now. God helped me know how hurtful my thoughts and opinions had been, how judgmental and critical I had acted in the past.

Especially toward people I knew well and loved.

God used that time to teach me deep and significant truths, but back then the waiting was very difficult. Thanksgiving Day hit with all the big meals, all the pies, all the leftovers. I loved it and ate as much as I wanted—and then some. I'm sure I gained another twenty pounds that fall. I began to think, *Wow, I'm going to be as big as a house before long.* I couldn't see any end to my struggle.

Why? Because I loved food more than ever before. But still I kept waiting.

Finally, in mid-December, I was speaking at a university in California, where most of my relatives live. My niece Debbie Smalley was saying good-bye to me at the airport when she handed me a book. "I've been reading this, and it's been really helpful. It's the best book on food I've ever read. It was so motivating for me." (Was my eating really that obvious?)

I stood there dumbfounded. Debbie knew nothing of what I was doing. She didn't know I was praying that God would free me from my overeating problem and from what for me had become a food addiction. I still hadn't told anyone of my private experiment with letting go of my own abilities and letting God take over. Certainly my eating habits did not give clues that I was anxious to change.

I took the book and kept myself from looking surprised. But what I wanted to say was, "Debbie, I don't need a book on eating." At that moment, it never occurred to me that I had been praying for that very thing—some type of breakthrough given to me by God's design.

It fascinates me now as I look back because only God could have prompted her to give me that book. I put it in my briefcase and thanked her. I didn't think about it again until halfway through my flight. My speaking engagement that day had drained me, and I was flat-out exhausted. I planned to sleep the whole flight.

The last thing I wanted to do on that airplane was read a book. Especially a book about how to eat. I already knew how to do that. But partway into the flight, I had a strong impression that had to be from God: *Get that book out of your briefcase!*

I looked around and saw that no one was talking to me. *This is crazy!*

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I thought. *I'm too tired to read. I would probably read two paragraphs and be sound asleep.*

But I took the book out.

I still didn't realize that God might be trying to get my attention with that particular book. He speaks to each of us differently, but at that moment in time he wanted me to read that book. Why? Because he alone knew what it would take to reach me.

The book *What the Bible Says about Healthy Living* is written by Dr. Rex Russell. My first thought was, *I don't even want to know this information.* Then I heard that still small voice rattling around in the basement of my heart again: *Read this book, will you! Are you not praying to me to free you? Read the book!*

I sighed out loud. "Okay, God, I'll read it."

THE MIRACLE

I figured I would pick up the book, glance at a few pages, and skim it for a few minutes. Maybe read it later. Instead I read the first page. Then the second and the third and the fourth. Minutes passed, and I could literally feel my eyes being opened for the first time. I could sense my spirit, my whole life opening up to facts about nutrition that I had been vaguely aware of but had never accepted.

It was the moment I had been praying for.

Let me say again that it wasn't the book that gave me the miracle I had been praying for. It was God. And in his grace he knew what it would take to give me the change I had been praying for. Many of you could read a book like this one and find it filled with material you have read a hundred times before. It might leave you totally unmoved.

The point isn't *how* God gives you a breakthrough; the point is that he *will*. God in his grace and strength will find a way to meet you where you are.

You see, I had slipped into a negative cycle regarding the connection between food and love. I made poor food choices, and those were harming my emotional health. At the same time, my poor emotional health was harming my relationship with close friends, loved ones, and others. That, in turn, was harming my physical health—contributing to my weakened immune system and high blood pressure.

I needed a miracle to break this cycle, and you may need a miracle, too.

God used Rex Russell's book to give me my breakthrough, but yours might be a conversation or an attitude adjustment or a magazine article or a sermon. Maybe you'll experience your breakthrough after reading the seven steps to lasting change in part 6 of this book. Only God knows.

Anyway, after reading the book, I felt released of the urge to overeat. I felt free and clean on the inside! I was excited and hopeful. Everything in the book made so much sense, I had to wonder where this information had been for fifty-eight years of my life.

Rex Russell's way of looking at food and how we eat opened my eyes to a whole new world of health. Some of what the book said was not new to me, but the way the information was put together was just right for me. I could feel God's power inside, allowing me to make a decision then and there. I didn't want to eat again, not until I finished the book, reread it, outlined it, and understood it. Not until I could start implementing the information in my own life. It was like a quiet power at work inside me.

From that moment on I felt total freedom, and that led to a four-day fast. I had no desire to eat! I had no hunger pains, and I wasn't light-headed. When I fasted in the past, I would feel weak and even faint when I would stand up. I had none of that. I was so charged up with God's strength that I was absolutely sure this was his answer to my prayers.

It was a total miracle for me.

Operating in God's strength, I read the information in the book, understood it, and instantly stopped my destructive eating habits. Later in this book I'll share some of Rex Russell's guidelines to healthy, biblical eating—not because it's the only way to eat, but because it helped me. Maybe it'll help you, too.

Healthy eating led to the next discovery—that with my new food choices, I recognized vast improvements in my emotional health. This in turn helped me love my family better, to be more empathetic and kind, more compassionate, and more the person they needed me to be. As this new dynamic took root in my life, my physical health improved. Finally, my improved health has helped me to continue making healthy food choices. And that's how I stumbled onto the amazing connection between food and love.

During this time I read dozens of books and found volumes of research that underscored the truths I was recognizing. Next, I interviewed thousands of people and found that they, too, had seen this cycle, this connection at

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work in their lives—negatively or positively. That information is included in this book as well.⁴

Today I am thrilled to tell you that nothing about food choices, my emotional health, my relationships, my physical health, or my spiritual health has been the same since. I not only lost all the extra weight by eating healthy food but also experienced many other unexpected benefits. I have been so healthy during the past few years that I have not had any illnesses, not even a cold. All of the joint and muscle soreness and stiffness that I experienced for years are gone, even after spending many hours doing rigorous manual labor. A truly miraculous consequence is that one day after I fell off my tractor and landed on my back, I had no pain or stiffness the next day—a remarkable thing for a person my age. I can only conclude that this newfound health is the result of my healthy eating habits. I lost all the extra weight by eating healthy food, a process I'll describe later.

One of the important outcomes of my battle with food is that God used it to convict me about how insensitive I had been to others in their struggles with food. When I look back on all of the years I hurt people with my rude comments, I see the grace they extended to me—grace I should have been giving them. I'm so grateful that they not only have forgiven me but also accepted me despite my insensitive behavior. I realize that I messed up in two very powerful ways. First, I tried to change them, which strained my relationship with them; and second, I refused to see how God wanted to change *me* and change the way I treated other people. In the process, I only made things worse—both for others and for myself.

I learned something very important about the connection between food and love in this process: *As important as eating correctly is for our health, having strong, loving relationships is even more important.* In fact, a loving relationship can almost overcome the damage of poor foods. But with my critical spirit toward those who were overweight, I weakened important relationships in my life, and in the process I weakened my own health.

As the result of my personal journey, I bring you this book.

No, it doesn't contain all the answers, and certainly it doesn't contain the definitive answers to a myriad of complex issues involving food, emotional health, relationships, and physical health. But it contains information that helped change my life and the lives of thousands of others, and it recognizes a connection that might help you find the breakthrough you're looking for. Perhaps as you read, you will see yourself, and in the process you, too, will find change.