

Watch out for the bliss point

BY NICKIE POLSON -- MARCH 8, 2013

Follow your bliss. That is good advice when it means to follow the dictates of your heart and find your way in life. But today, bliss has a darker side.

When it comes to eating, few of us realize we have a scientifically analyzed "bliss point." But processed food manufacturers have figured it out in detail. Their food scientists work to create foods that fuel our bliss point; they create and feed our cravings.

The bliss point involves a balance of taste, appearance and mouth feel. Our brain chemistry betrays us because those foods act to stimulate the 'feel-good' chemicals in our brains. We enjoy the experience and we want more. Given a food with the right combination, most people will find it irresistible.

The more we find out about this kind of food engineering, the more it seems to resemble creating addiction.

More and more voices are being raised to say that the engineered foods are addictive - and that they are designed to be so. The marketing of these foods is being questioned, especially as the ads often target children.

One of the processed foods most effective in reaching our bliss point is the potato chip. Start with the coating of salt, the fat content that stirs the brain's pleasure centers, the sugar in the potato starch, then add the mouth feel of the chip and the crunch itself. It adds up to a very successful junk food.

A British study of health professionals found that even they were gaining weight and the 'food' most likely to contribute to the weight, without providing healthy nutrition, was the potato chip.

Why can't we eat just one? Many reasons, but a big one is the potato starch which is more quickly absorbed than regular sugar. It causes blood glucose levels to spike and then fall, leaving us craving more.

Not all of us are caught by the bliss that these foods can create. Many of us find the processed foods too sweet, too salty, or too fatty. Some of us are born with different tastes. Some of us, when we steer clear of the world of processed food, find that our tastes change.

Obviously that is not true for everyone. Walk through a grocery store, and it is quickly obvious that processed foods form a huge part of our society's diet.

Many who did not start out with a taste for processed foods have found themselves going more and more in that direction because of the desire for convenience.

Thanks to well-developed food science, the more processed food you eat, the more you want to eat.

Probably the best way out of this dilemma is to change our attitudes. Once we know we are being manipulated thanks to our bliss point and the cravings it creates for excessive sugar, fat and salt, we can look at things differently.

The recent attention given to the appalling numbers of obese people, particularly children, is helping. Two years ago, the Hudson Institute, a US think tank on public policy, reported that healthier foods accounted for more than 70 per cent of the growth in sales for consumer packaged goods.

The advertising on television has shifted. More products are using health as a selling point.

However, a buyer must still beware. When a processed food suddenly claims to be low in sugar or fat or salt, it may not have crossed the line into being a healthy food. Chances are, one problem component has been switched for another.

As one food scientist has said, if you take away the sugar, salt and fat, processed food tends to taste like cardboard. So when one of the contributors to the bliss point is removed, more of the others must be added in order to maintain an appealing taste. Or a chemical substitute is added to imitate the missing component, which often does not serve health either.

The food companies have done what companies do - they find products that people want and they advertise so that people know about the products. The trouble arose when the science of processed food grew to know too much about how to give us what we want - and we knew too little.

We know more now. We can start making better choices. We can look for better options. In the last 30 years or so, we have put our convenience ahead of many responsibilities. We expected that processed foods would serve our needs. We were wrong. We have to take back the responsibility for putting healthy food on our tables.
