

## INTRODUCTION

**P** psychological Nutrition is not a concept that most women have ever really contemplated. We don't consider our emotions and reactions within the context of nourishment. Consequently, we unthinkingly consume a diet of negative emotions and thereby allow no room for positive emotions. This mindset is particularly true for those of us who are in middle-age or older and who have that "hyper-responsible" gene. The concepts that we introduce— emotional anorexia, binge emotions, emotional jelly belly, and psychological malnourishment—will ring an intuitive bell.

Psychological malnutrition has a profoundly harmful effect. It keeps us in the same emotionally unsatisfying loop— one that is fed by a false sense of obligation. It keeps us unsatisfied with our lives, our work, and our relationships; it keeps us closing doors to opportunities. Ultimately, it can destroy our marriages, our friendships, and our family relationships through martyrdom, insincere niceness, and doing for others with resentment rather than love.

All of this ultimately is what keeps the arteries of our soul clogged with "high fat" emotions.

As you glance at the Chapters listed, you'll see that the purpose of this book is not toward achieving giddy happiness (although we want you to have that). Rather, our purpose is to encourage you to become incredibly creative and energized. We want to inspire you to unleash your full potential, and to fulfill your passion and destiny. While that sounds very exciting and positive, the truth is, you won't be able to do it if you're in a psychologically malnourished state.

This book will explain how people, and in particular women, can achieve and maintain Psychological Nutrition. Our interactions with people, as well as our reactions to events, can have a profound effect on our mental health. The Chapters in the book discuss the numerous situations we find ourselves in when we experience "high-cost emotions," how and why we react as we do, and ways in which we can take control and attain positive mental health.

The authors happen to be clinical psychologists; but more importantly, we are women in some stage of middle age who discovered that we are at a turning point in our lives. We're no different than millions of other people—women and men, young and old—who want to live a physically and mentally healthier and more enriched life. How you go about doing that is the basis of this book. And what you achieve—for yourself and for those with whom you share your bounty—is the ultimate aim.

## CHAPTER 1

# Psychological Nutrition: High-Cost Emotions and Emotional Calories

**T**ina had counted calories for as long as she could remember which at 50 was a good bit of time. And she had cheated on the calorie count for about the same stretch. Now she was in dangerous territory: the bakery section of the grocery store where she was considering a small Bundt cake.

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*Brushed with Belgian chocolate and sprinkled with toffee for a truly delightful afternoon treat.*

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Hmmm. She turned it over to read the nutritional label for due diligence: it said, "150 calories a serving." Only 150 calories a serving! Yes, she believed it—all this took was ignoring that there was a total of 10 servings in one Bundt cake. Her eyes twitched. Her mouth felt dry. A sour taste coated her tongue.

She felt completely burned out from the day. Tina looked at the cake again: one serving meant an itty bitty slice. Well, she would just stick to one serving. Didn't she deserve a treat? Yes, indeed she did. Hadn't her best client left her today for another firm? Didn't her boss just give her office to the young and cute new hire whom he was "mentoring" and moved Tina into the broom closet (not literally, but pretty damn close)? She desperately needed a delightful treat. But, could she stick to one serving? Who was she kidding? That "serving" was so small that it wouldn't satisfy the chocolate cravings of an ant. Oh, who cared! Tina threw the cake into her shopping cart.

Now, what is interesting is that after eating that cake (yes, all of it in one fell swoop) Tina did not feel better. It had, as you might astutely guess, the opposite effect. Now she felt bloated, angry, irritated, upset with herself, *and* burned out.

Wait. Wait. Before you throw down this book in disgust thinking, "Yeah, I know all about stress eating, binge eating, emotional eating, impulse buying, and all the remedies: make a list before you grocery shop, don't shop for food when you're hungry, or tired, or blah, blah, blah. I don't need another book to tell me that. Plus, isn't it true that some foods do relieve emotional distress—if not, missy experts, why are they called 'comfort foods?'" What was Tina supposed to do? Stuff her face with a bag of raw kale?

No arguments there. We'd go for the cake over kale too. Judge not lest ye be judged. Who hasn't been Tina?

But, this isn't a book about dieting. At least not the way you might think—no one is going to stop you (or Tina) from eating that cake.

In fact, this book isn't about food at all. It's not about sustenance in the physical realm.

This is a book about psychological nourishment. Feelings are the ingredients. Relationships and events are the products you consume. Emotional reactions are the calories they cost. And just as with food, some bloat you, weigh you down, and add baggage around the middle, while others energize and nourish you.

Recall what drove Tina to eat the whole cake anyway: she was feeling burned out. Burned. Out. Think of a fireplace with logs; before the fire is set, the logs are whole and sturdy. Then the fire is set, and slowly the flames begin to form small licks at first, then they are raging. Soon you can't even see the logs anymore. Quickly the logs are devoured, and the flames die down to nothing. Now all that's left are ashes where the logs once were. They are burned out. That's the analog to emotions: if you begin the day with logs and end up with ashes, you are burned out. What made Tina feel burned out? Her boss and the crappy day, you say (and think); isn't that obvious?

Hmm. Maybe. But how do you know that? How much emotional energy did she start the day with? How did that power get used up? Maybe she was running on empty for a long time. Is it possible that she was "burned out" long before the day started?

Is it possible that the bad breaks happened because she was already emotionally spent? Maybe that led to the client leaving; maybe it led to sloppiness and negativity that caused her boss to decide to mentor someone more enthusiastic? Most likely, it was more than just that one bad day.

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**Psychological nutrition comes from  
feelings which the ingredients.**

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Let's step back and consider this: just as your body requires a certain amount of caloric energy to run smoothly, so too does your psyche require a certain amount of emotional energy to function. While flour, sugar, baking powder, butter, salt, chocolate, and eggs make up the cake, so too do emotions make up the elements of your day-day-to-day experiences.

This is the core concept, which is worth repeating: Whether you are psychologically nourished or malnourished is contingent upon the "food" you put into your psyche. That food is your feelings—how you react, how you interpret, how you view the world. The food that you consume; that is, the products, come in these two broad packages: relationships and events. How you interpret and emotionally respond to the relationships and events are *the calories they cost*.

Adverse events and reactions are high-fat, high cost, and low benefit; they deplete the amount of psychological energy you have. Positive developments and reactions are low-fat and high benefit; they add to the psychological energy you have. And just like with food, some relationships and events are toxic—you may have allergic reactions to them, they constipate or burden you—while other experiences energize and nourish you and allow you to move to new heights. Just like electricity, this psychological energy can be generated or depleted.

How? It's a simple formula. Emotions that increase or produce energy are nourishing. Those that consume energy are unhealthy or toxic. Our day is made up of units of experiences; there are those that add energy value, those that take away, and some that are just neutral (We'll discuss these later). Feelings are the primary unit that make up the ingredients of a

psychological experience. No big news here, right? But, think about Tina again; she was burned out—meaning that she was running in negative energy numbers. She had moved into and used up her reserve.

How did this happen? If we know that feelings or emotional reactions are related to what we experience during the day, why do we engage in those that make us feel depleted? High-cost emotions are high caloric items—they are empty emotions that weigh you down and deplete your psychological reserves. Just like high fat, high-calorie foods don't nourish but add cholesterol deposits, fat around the belly, etc., high-cost emotions add fat around your emotional belly (and we'll tell you how they also add to your physical belly). Yes, you say, "I got it." There are umpteen books and motivational speakers out there who tell us, "stay positive, release endorphins, increase serotonin neurotransmitters with your attitude!"

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**Relationships and events are the products you consume.**

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Yes, yes, you say. "Got it. I know all this." Still, "got it" and "doing it" don't always go together.

Why do most of us do this anyway—run the same race of doing too much, being overburdened, and then like Tina, feeling burned out? It's not that we're stupid: this pattern is evident even in women who hold multiple advanced degrees, have the veneer of success, and are doing it all.

If we know all this, why do we continually expend emotional energy down into the negative numbers? Why do any of us do this

over and over (and we all do) until it just drains us dry? It just doesn't make sense. Ugh.

**Emotional reactions are the calories they cost.**

We suggest this explanation culled from our long experience, both personally as well as professionally as mental health clinicians: we do this because we have no clue, much less awareness, as to when, where, why, and how we are using up psychological energy.

In fact, we aren't even aware of the state of our emotional tank (on full, half-full, or empty) because this is something that we are not trained to assess. Physical needs for food are easily detected—a growling stomach, headache from low blood sugar—but, emotional needs for nourishment are much less obvious. But, okay, how do you become aware? We'll tell you in a minute.

First, let's go back to Tina. Recall, when she was in the grocery store looking at the nutritional content of the cake. It was right there for her to see and assess. But, you might argue, so what? Didn't Tina choose to buy the cake anyway? Didn't she elect to eat the whole thing, even knowing the nutritional content? Yes. We're not saying having information always leads to good decision-making, but knowledge is nonetheless power. It tells you about the terrain of the land you are traversing. You can decide to eat the cake, but now you know that this was 1,500 calories you spent on that item; maybe it changes your behavior, maybe it doesn't. But, if you had no awareness that the cake was 1,500 calories and consumed it as well as many other high

caloric items, what would be the result—morbid obesity, most likely. Knowledge gives you choice. And this book and our concepts are ultimately about that: a way to promote making educated decisions. Later on, you will see the value of doing so. Right now, let's just go over the basic concepts so that you can test-run it in your life.

**The food that you consume; that is, the products, come in these two broad packages: relationships and events.**

Pick up a product you've bought at the grocery store. Let's say a box of macaroni and cheese. What's the first thing you see?

The name of the product: "Cheesy Mac-N-Cheese."

The next thing is the description: "a whole grain take on a classic favorite: velvety smooth, mild cheddar cheese smothering whole wheat rosemary infused penne."

Flip the box and you will see some more descriptions of the product: "A smooth buttery treat for those who crave this classic comfort food. Made from a blend of three cheeses to maximize flavor, but with subtle hints of cinnamon, fennel and allspice, this mac-n-cheese will tantalize and satisfy." This narrative is designed to sell you on the product, to tempt your taste-buds.

Next comes a listing of the nutritional value and the FDA example for macaroni and cheese.

No pretty words, just the FDA facts to allow you to make an informed decision. There is also another piece of interesting information listed: expiration dates. A product to be consumed does not last forever; you should use it by a given date.

Otherwise, it may have an unfavorable taste, cause health problems, or have less nutritional value than initially identified.

**How you interpret and emotionally respond to the relationships and events are the calories they cost.**

## Psychological Nutrition Labels

Now, imagine if the events that you are going to confront during your day had a psychological nutritional label.

Let's use this example. Your family—meaning your adult brother and sister—have decided that it is important for the whole family to spend Thanksgiving week with your elderly parents in the state where they live.

The event is going to be a double celebration. Your oldest sibling is getting remarried, and your parents are also celebrating their 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

The entire family has not been together for at least a decade. It may look like this:

Front Box: Quality Time with Family

Back Box: Truly a Thanksgiving!

**Small print details:** You have to travel 2,000 miles; your sister and brother reside near your parents who now live in a senior residence community.

Your sister insists that you stay in her home so as to “bond again” and to “have “sleepover fun.” Therefore, you cannot get a hotel room because this would be highly insulting.

You will be sleeping on a sofa-bed in your sister's house.

Your husband refuses; he will go to a hotel.

Your sister's husband is a know-it-all, big mouth who insists on ruining every event with charged political discussion.

Because your brother has a cat, and your Aunt May is allergic to dander, Thanksgiving is at your sister's house.

Your brother is marrying a “bimbo” 20 years younger than he who is clearly after his money.

This is your sister's opinion which she stated to you over the phone (as said “bimbo” has insulted your sister by telling her she will not be a bridesmaid).

Your adult daughter cannot attend due to her job demands—your parents are upset.

Your brother's children are not attending because they hate the bimbo. Your parents want you to be the peacemaker.

Look at the barebones psychological nutritional facts.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL NUTRITION

#### FACTS

SERVINGS: 7 DAYS

AMOUNT: 1

#### EMOTIONAL CONTENT

HIGH FAT EMOTIONS: 90%: IRRITATION, ANGER, GUILT, RESENTMENT

LOW FAT EMOTIONS: 10% AFFECTION

**WARNING: CONSUMPTION OF THIS PRODUCT WILL BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR EMOTIONAL HEALTH.**

Ask yourself this: If you had this label for the event, would you attend?

In fact, the answer is likely, “no,” you wouldn’t—at least, not the way it is packaged. But our experiences and obligations do not come with psychological nutrition labels. In fact, it is likely that you would attend, or are planning to, or have attended similar family situations that are as pleasant as nails driven through your eyeballs.

Why?

Because many of us, and women in particular, plunge headlong into peril just like the scenario above because we feel the pressure of obligations: to family, employers, and friends. And out of guilt, a desire to be helpful, to be a pleaser, to be everything to everyone everywhere and forevermore.

Of course, no one can do this. In fact, one shouldn’t do it because it is counterproductive to healthy functioning. In short, we ignore the warnings and end up in the bakery section like Tina looking to a Bundt cake for solace.

Okay, you say. That’s interesting: a nutrition label for obligations that we encounter. But come on, no one “prints out” psychological nutrition labels.

True, but wouldn’t it be interesting if they did? What would it tell you about the decisions that you make? How would it influence you? Making psychological nutrition labels is exactly what we will encourage YOU to do.

To begin the process you need some basic concepts and we will provide you with a method of self-assessment. Whoa—don’t throw the book down, this isn’t difficult; we’re not adding another obligation; we won’t have you writing endless useless information in a workbook. Believe us you can do this—we did and we’re just as busy and prone to being everywoman as you.

**Overview of psychological nutrition:** We are all familiar (too familiar, you might say) with calories in a nutritional context. Calories are units of energy. You put units of energy into your body (by consuming food) as well as take them out (by exercising, your daily activities). Excess units (calories) are unneeded energy that get turned into body fat. This storage is, purportedly, for later use; but really it just sort of hangs on our bodies collecting in the most unflattering places. That’s food.

Bad food—empty calories—are products that don’t nourish the body but wear and break it down (like high-fat foods that deposit cholesterol, or high sugar products that impact on the functioning of your kidneys, liver, heart etc.) and the body breaks down (heart attack, cancer, liver failure, diabetes, etc.).

Now, emotions are also units of energy. By analogy, in psychological nutrition, negative emotions are like those empty calories that deplete the body. Negative emotions don’t add energy; they break down psychological stamina. Positive emotions, however, augment psychological reserves.

So, the basic concept is this: Empty emotional calories are negative emotions that you put into yourself, and ones that will eventually burn you out. They cause psychological starvation; it’s as if you were eating paper or a non-nourishing substance. These are what we call high-fat emotions.

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**Women plunge headlong into peril because we feel the pressure of obligations to family, employers, and friends; a desire to be helpful, to be a pleaser, to be everything to everyone, everywhere, and forevermore.**

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**Concept 1 High-fat emotions:** These are emotions that you impulsively engage in that are negative, energy draining, and bad for you (junk emotions, like junk food): they create psychological pain and can heighten the perception of physical pain as well. They require no discipline, just knee-jerk emotional reactivity. They are downhill walking (and tripping) and require no development of emotional muscles. They form an emotional jelly-belly.

Examples: guilt, resentment, anger, bitterness, jealousy, depression, anxiety, worry, feeling less-than, fear, doubt and second-guessing yourself, hurried/agitated internal state, pessimism, frustration, conflictual/adversarial impulses. These are all junk emotions like junk food. A diet of these emotions is unhealthy.

**Concept 2 Low-fat emotions:** These are emotions that you have to work at keeping in the forefront of your psychological functioning and ones that you should promote. They are positive, energy augmenting, and good for you. They require practice, because they are “uphill” walking, are not impulsive, and require emotional muscle building and discipline (but surprisingly not a lot—believe us we did this and it hasn’t been difficult).

Examples: excitement, enthusiasm, optimism, calmness, contentment, joy, focused attention, clear thinking, laser-like concentration, creative impulses, fun-oriented, humor seeking, cooperative and collaborative impulses.

**Concept 3 High-fat emotions drain; Low-fat emotions energize**

Negative emotions are exhausting. They drain you. You know that. They suck creativity and fun out of your life; they poison your inner self and close doors to opportunity.

Positive emotions do the opposite; they energize you and open up your world, both in terms of your inner self and the doors to opportunity.

**Concept 4 Psychological energy is a resource that can be depleted or increased.**

You begin each day with a certain amount of psychological energy. The amount may be in the negative numbers or the positive numbers. Just like your bank account—you have a certain sum of money; if you continue to spend while not replenishing, you will eventually end up in the negative numbers (or the analog: in emotional bankruptcy).

The amount of psychological energy that you have available is dependent on you and how you decide to organize your emotional life. You may have spent a lifetime drawing out without putting in, and therefore, like Tina in our example, you are running on empty. Eventually, whether it’s a vehicle or a person, an entirely empty tank won’t allow a car to run or a person to function without causing damage to oneself.

**Concept 5 Emotional pyramids.** Just like the food pyramid, there are emotional pyramids. You can find them in psychological theory (such as Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs), and we provide reference materials for those who are interested in further study.

Here’s a typical way to construct that pyramid, following standard psychological theory, as applied to psychological nutrition.

The base of the pyramid consists of the emotions that run your everyday life: basic attentiveness, orientation to remaining alert and aware.

The next level up in the pyramid are emotions that are social lubricants; these help avoid conflict; such as, biting your tongue, engaging in social niceties.

The level above is the need for affiliation. Humans are group animals; we like to feel like we belong somewhere. These are