

Abstract

Unlike Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia Nervosa, people who suffer from compulsive eating have no way of hiding their condition. This means that their condition is obvious to everybody they encounter. Yet what is it like to be an obese compulsive eater in our society, and what are the implications for Gestalt Therapists working with these issues?

This study attempted to build a picture of people with compulsive eating issues, and to investigate the emotional, environmental, social, and psychological processes that may take place for them.

Through a phenomenological study of four women with compulsive eating issues, it looked at how issues of abandonment and neglect lay behind this condition, and the role of shame in perpetuating the process in adult life.

It was found that the life of somebody with compulsive eating issues is one of isolation, and that this isolation goes, in many cases, back to childhood, where safety and nurturance were often absent from the family environment. Food became the main means by which this need was met, a way of soothing the anxiety and somatised feelings of abandonment in a way which did not involve the risk of seeking support from others. It was also found that a great deal of shame surrounds the needing process, exacerbating the need, and placing the individual in an inescapable cycle of need and shame.