

# On Hunger

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The feeling of hunger is a peculiar amalgam of physical sensation and emotion. Most people rarely disentangled these two, very different aspects of our experience. Instead we unknowingly act out hunger, allowing it to drive what we eat and as I will illustrate, other decisions that we make.

The most literal associations to hunger are of appetite for food. Hunger is defined physiologically as an impulse to rebalance a deficiency of nutrients in the body, usually resolved through calorific intake. Biologists refer to this resolution of hunger as a return to homeostasis. But compulsive eating and eating disorders such as Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia illustrate that a physiological definition alone is not sufficient. Factors that distort the “healthy” resolution of hunger have been found to include mood, visual stimuli and even pre-disposition to addiction. But hunger can be seen more broadly than just a desire to eat food. If we explore the emotional aspects of hunger, we can see that it plays a role in many aspects of life, beyond what we eat.

Metaphorical expressions of hunger are widespread in our culture. We hear statements like “He’s got a ravenous sexual appetite” or “she’s hungry for financial success” in casual conversations. Hunger is applied not only to food, but to desires for sex, finances, status, athleticism, celebrity, academia and more.

If we return to inner experience, we can see that hunger is both of a desire to *have* something and of a desire to be *rid* of something. This may sound contradictory or counter intuitive, but if we look on an emotional angle, hunger can be of wanting to be rid of feelings of discontent. In this respect, hunger is indeed as the biologically minded suggest, a desire to return to homeostasis, but importantly, also a desire to return to an emotional as well as a biological homeostasis.

This sense of contentment or wholeness is what we seek when we eat for emotional reasons. We devour because we think (consciously or otherwise) that food will provide contentment. We may also be hungry for a substance (such as alcohol or drugs) that will dull unconscious feelings of being incomplete. In some cases these hungers for substances that lessen feelings associated with hunger can also have a healthy, real and tangible benefit. There’s nothing singularly wrong with alcohol, shopping or the pursuit of career goals. But, to truly understand our hunger, we need to learn to discern whether those desires might be of a genuine want or need to have, or born of a desire to be rid of the discontent of emotional hunger.

In this light, notions of *emptiness* become useful to understand hunger. Emptiness is the emotional manifestation of physical hunger. It is also a desire for contentment or wholeness, which is true of both the emotional and the physiological hungers. Framed in this light, we hunger to be free of emptiness, or to feel complete. Food, and other things that we hunger for, are objects that we then project the *promise* of contentment onto.

So if we all have emptiness and hunger seeks to fill it, then what's the problem? As with many psychological phenomena, hunger on it's own is not problematic. Issues occur when hunger becomes extreme, remains unconscious, or drives risky or unhealthy behaviour.

At it's most extreme hunger can seem so vast, so insatiable, that it simply can't be faced. It is suppressed, because encounter it would result in an unacceptable threat. Psychiatrists and psychotherapists who work with those suffering anorexia sometimes invoke notions of *emptiness* or *absence* to describe the profound wounding which underlies that disorder.

For those suffering an internal sense of emptiness, It's as if the centre of the being doesn't exist. The self-actualised, functioning selfhood of the being has not fully formed. Instead, a profound, painful void remains. It's a sense of non-being.

Imminent British Psychiatrists' Donald Winnicott suggest that this sense of emptiness is a result of "caregiver failure" in early childhood; through experiences such as sexual or emotional and physical abuse, or more insidiously through subtle forms of neglect such as a insufficient attentiveness to the infants' emotional needs. Winnicott and others suggest that *mirroring*, through eye and skin contact and later in infancy, reflecting back to the infant their feelings and their agency, impart a sense to the infant that they exist and that they are whole. Additionally, emotional attunement between mother and child means that intolerable feelings experienced by the infant can be transferred to the mother. The "good enough mother" is able to modulate those difficult feelings, process them herself and return to the infant through gently and attentively calming the infant, bring about a sense of safety and containment. If attentively and consistently contained, an internalised sense of contentment is eventually introjected. Caregiver failure, where an internalised sense of contentment is not introjected, can result instead in the introjection of a sense of emptiness. In short: some of us, through our developmental experience, have an underlying sense of emptiness that goes much deeper than physical hunger.

From 2013, I conducted a two-year masters-level qualitative research study into the experience of hunger in men. I was interested in men specifically because so much research has already been done on emotional eating in women. The study brought to the surface that hunger is rarely of a pure physiological nature; rather it is often an attempt to avoid feeling a deep-seated sense of emptiness. This

emptiness at first *feels* very much like a physical hunger: it is a sense of discomfort or mild irritation, that something “isn’t quite right”. It plays at the edges of awareness, and through conditioning and a well-intended desire to ease difficult feelings food appears to promise a remedy.

A tendency to devour (inhaling food quickly and in great pace often with little appreciation of the process of chewing or eating), mindlessly and often-in reaction to external triggers and internal emotional stimuli is associated with the sating of this hunger. By applying a systematic approach to exploring hunger, and using techniques of mindfulness, *focusing*, and *embodied writing*, the automatic reactions to hunger could be arrested, and unpacked, revealing complex layers of memory, meaning, symbol and emotion that surround hunger.

The techniques used to explore hunger included:

- Using *creative imagination* to evoke from the unconscious material, which is not usually accessible, or has not been triggered by the current environment.
- Using *focusing* and *mindfulness* to heighten levels of self-awareness and to create a space where subtle emotional currents can be witnessed.
- Using *creative approaches* such as drawing, poetry and *embodied writing* to capture the findings and document them, enabling later deepening and in the case of research, documenting in order to analyse and write up.

In psychotherapeutic clinical terms, this research found that psychological theory and self-help material related to women may often be applicable to men. I have since began to consider that cultural norms inhibit men from exploring the vulnerability of their emotional hunger, instead preferring to associate their hunger with notions of dominance and virility. Clinically I have begun to find that using hunger and emptiness as reference points for the clients’ emotional experience provide useful interpretative waypoints for the therapist, allowing a greater level of empathy to be created between therapist and client. In some cases, clients have related their own embodied experiences of emptiness, to childhood trauma and again to a desire for food. This has provided both a common language for the therapy, and a context and insight around which lasting change can emerge.

Perhaps most ground-breaking, and certainly of most personal value, has been the finding that the exploration of hunger in itself can lead to considerably personal change and growth.

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