

Ep #9: Smell Memories



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With Your Host

Natalie Brown

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This is *Weight Loss Success* with Natalie Brown, episode nine.

Welcome to *Weight Loss Success* with Natalie Brown. If you're a successful woman who is ready to stop struggling with your weight, you're in the right place. You'll learn everything you need to know to lose weight for the last time in bitesize pieces. Here's your host, certified life and weight coach Natalie Brown.

Hey everybody. Oh my gosh, so guess what. It smells like spring today outside. It's just the most wonderful thing. Have you ever had that experience of smelling a season come to being? And I'm not talking about lighting some scented candle and thinking, "This smells like Christmas," but rather, the experience of walking outside and breathing in the air with a hint of sunlight and dirt and maybe even tulip shoots just under the surface, getting ready to burst through.

It just smells like almost. Like renewal and fresh starts and promise to me. If all those random English scents attached, that's what I imagine it smells like out there today. I just read a book called *The Scent Keeper*, which is probably why my brain is describing scents like this, which starts out with a little girl and her dad living in a cabin on a remote island.

And the walls of their cabin are lined with little drawers, each containing a sealed jar with a single rolled up square of paper inside. Each paper holds a scent memory. A memory of a particular place and moment, just like how a photograph captures the look of a particular place and moment.

And it's just the most captivating idea to me. I'm kind of smell-obsessed, which is both a blessing and a curse because I love and appreciate and surround myself purposefully with amazing scents, but I am also pretty sensitive to the not so amazing ones. I can detect with my refined sense of smell, even the faintest odor, pleasant or unpleasant, which my husband's nose cannot detect.

And so he would probably tell you that he's pretty sure I just have a wild smell imagination. But tomato-tom-ah-toe. Smell is my favorite sensory

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experience for sure. And our sense of smell is tied strongly to our memory of past experiences and our experience of taste.

There are only two to three synapses that separate our olfactory bulbs or our smell receptors from the amygdala and the hippocampus, which are our emotion and memory centers. This super close connection explains why we can smell something and be immediately taken to a particular memory and feel the emotion of it.

My daughter got a pair of black Doc Marten boots for Christmas a couple of years ago. We have the same size feet so one day, I borrowed her boots. And as I slid my feet into them, the sharp smell of the Doc Marten leather reached my nose and I was immediately taken back to my sophomore year of high school.

I hadn't smelled that smell of that particular leather since I was 15. And I was bowled over by the power of that scent connection. I remembered how I had to buy my Doc Martens on layaway and put money on them every paycheck because Doc Martens were everything when I was in high school in the 90s, and they were expensive.

I also remembered about how much I believed those boots would make me happy, how hard I worked for them. And then how hard it felt to walk around in them with all of my teenage insecurity and self-loathing. I remembered vividly how much shame I felt about my body and my weight and how much I wanted to be different than I was. It didn't matter how cool my boots were. I never felt like enough.

I could feel the emotion memory of being that girl in those boots. And I wanted to travel back in time and give my 15-year-old self a big warm hug, look at her in the eyes and just tell her she is always enough, no matter what it says on the scale or what she puts on her feet.

Have you ever had this experience of a smell taking you to a past memory and feeling the emotion of it immediately? Maybe smelling the cologne of a past boyfriend and feeling regret or pain, or a flower scent that reminds you

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of your grandma because she had those flowers growing in her garden. And maybe a feeling of love or longing.

Not only is our sense of smell really closely tied to our memory of past experiences, it's the dominant scents involved in our eating experience. Some people say it's between 70% and 95% of the experience. If you've ever had a head cold where your sinuses were congested and your sense of smell was affected, I'm sure you can attest to how different your eating experience is without your sense of smell.

If not, just try, at some point, plugging your nose, maybe next time you're eating, and pay attention to what it's like. It's much less pleasure and enjoyment when you eat without aroma. Now, before you start Googling how do I get rid of my sense of smell so I will want to eat less, bear with me.

The fact that we can have strong emotion memories tied to food smells and tastes can pose a bit of an issue for those of you who overeat. Because the connection is so strong between the two, we can associate or sometimes even fuse certain emotions with particular foods and their smells and start to think the food causes the feeling.

This has us seeking comfort in our grandma's apple pie, or joy in our mom's homemade banana bread. This association of food smells with memories and emotions was a useful connection when we were evolving and we needed to discern what to eat from what not to eat in order to survive.

Think about our ancient ancestors relying on their senses for information about what was edible and what wasn't. We evolved to interpret that particular pleasant smell of certain things as a signal that it was desirable as a food source, or even at the least inedible one, and maybe that particular unpleasant smells signaled danger.

It makes sense that our ancient ancestors would smell a particular berry or some rotten meat and be taken immediately back to the time that they ate it

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and got violently ill and they would then know not to eat it again. Or maybe they would smell honey and have an urge to eat it immediately as they were taken back in their memory to the time they ate it and felt a rush of energy.

But as with many of our primitive brain's default responses, as we are learning, this emotional response to food smells and subsequent urge to eat is causing us to overeat, to gain weight, and feel out of control a lot of the time. Our world is no longer a world where we can rely solely on our senses to guide us as to what to eat.

Not all things that smell pleasing are critical to our survival and must be eaten right now. Have you ever smelled fresh baked cinnamon rolls and felt an immediate desire to eat one? What about warm chocolate chip cookies? Pumpkin pie? Garlic bread? Is your mouth watering? You're welcome.

So how do we live in a world with so many smells and memories and desires and lose weight? Just as we learned that association between the food and the emotion initially, we can unlearn it. I love this quote by Rachel S. Hertz. "Nothing stinks but thinking makes it so."

Smell is subjective. We add meaning to it with our thoughts about it. I think Parmesan smells delicious. You may think it smells like vomit. Some people do. My husband loves the smell of oysters in a can because of all the memories of eating them while camping and hunting with his dad. And I make him eat them outdoors because I hate the smell so much.

If we can recognize our thoughts about and the associated memories and emotions of a particular food smell, we can interrupt the process before we eat the food. So here's how you start to identify those thoughts and the associated emotions.

Make a list of the foods that mean comfort to you and why. What are the particular memory stories of that food for you? Make a list of the foods that mean joy to you and why. Make a list of the foods that mean celebration,

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love, relief, fun, and all the memory stories that are associated with those feelings.

It isn't that food or its smell that create that feeling for you. It's your thoughts. Your food stories that create the feeling. We know that because the food that creates comfort for you will not create the same comfort for someone else. Your mom's green bean casserole that makes your mouth water might make my stomach turn.

The smell does not mean comfort or regret or love or longing. It's the thoughts that we have about the smell that give it meaning. It's possible for us to enjoy a smell simply for the pleasant experience it is, and not do anything else about it.

We can breathe deeply the warm smell of cinnamon rolls or the bright, sharp smell of garlic bread without any effect on our goals. So I challenge you to go out into the world and smell all the smells and decide right now what you want to think and do about them on purpose. It's totally up to you.

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Thanks for listening to this week's episode of *Weight Loss Success* with Natalie Brown. If you want to learn more about how to lose weight for the last time, come on over to itbeginswithathought.com. We'll see you here next week.