

Ep #37: Parenting Your Toddler Brain



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Natalie Brown

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This is *Weight Loss Success* with Natalie Brown, episode 37.

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. I wanted to share some words from Jessica today about the podcast. "I love how Natalie teaches you to think about weight loss and your body in a whole new way. Her story is so similar to mine, and I think so many people could relate to her."

I hope you all feel like Jessica does, that my story and the stories I share about clients and their struggles on the podcast are similar to yours. We are all unique, but we have so many similar threads running through our stories, and I have been where or near where you are.

I think about you all the time and how I can convey what has helped me to hopefully help you on your way. Thanks Jessica. Your gift for your review is on its way.

You hear me refer to your toddler brain and your adult brain all the time and so I wanted to kind of explore this topic a little bit and explain in a little more detail what exactly I mean when I say this. If you've ever been around a toddler, it will be very clear by the end of today's episode why this is an apt description of your primitive brain.

So when I refer to your toddler brain, I'm talking about your lower brain, your primitive brain, your lizard brain, your cave person brain. There's a lot of terms for it. It's basically the part of your brain that evolved early and is focused on survival.

This is where your fight or flight response exists, it's your reactive default state. Your adult brain is your prefrontal cortex. Your rational, decision-making brain. The part of your brain that can think about what you're

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thinking about, make observations, and that ultimately controls what you do.

Both are critical. The toddler brain has gotten us this far as the human race by focusing on and prioritizing survival. We stayed together in mutually beneficial groups and were driven to find food and stay away from danger and reproduce. All by our toddler brain and here we are.

The adult brain evolved to help us thrive, not just survive. To create, to self-evaluate, to make big picture decisions about the future. When it comes to emotion, for most of us, our toddler brain is in charge. It's on high alert at all times, interpreting any discomfort as danger and tripping our escape using food response.

Feel fear, eat, feel anxiety, eat, feel overwhelm, eat feel inadequacy, eat. Its constant objective is to get out of discomfort as quickly as possible, and food is a solution that works temporarily. We have to learn how to parent this toddler brain of ours, to take on the responsibility of our emotions and our subsequent reactions to them, rather than delegating the responsibility to food.

So let's talk about what this looks like by reviewing some examples in our weight loss journey of when our toddler brain is in charge, rather than our adult brain, and how to start changing that around. Have you ever been around a toddler who wants something?

Picture the grocery store checkout line. The prolific amount of candy that is placed right at toddler height. And the urgent scene that usually ensues as a result. Mom is trying to checkout, she's trying to manage unloading the groceries, carrying on a conversation with the clerk, thinking about other errands or dinner that needs to be made, or a project at work.

And the toddler is all about one thing: getting the candy that she just saw and now needs more than anything in the world into her mouth as quickly as possible. She knows that means demanding mom buy it and give it to her, so she begins the process of demanding over and over and over with

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eating the candy, her sole objective at all costs. Whatever it takes. And the tantrum begins.

Your toddler brain is constantly throwing tantrums. It may not show up as screaming, yelling, falling on the floor, going limp, hitting, running away, et cetera. But the drive is the same. It is driven by the in-the-moment immediacy.

As is characteristic of the toddler brain, there is no future focus. It is all about right now and right now only. Getting the thing we want feels like a life or death mission. Tantrums on your weight loss journey often look like an urgent desire for something that takes over and you feeling like you are eating out of your control.

It feels like tunnel vision for a specific food, a craving that demands your attention. It's loud, it's hyper focused, it's a disregard for anything but putting out the fire of desire. Our typical response to this is to make it stop as quickly as possible.

Just like the frazzled parent in the checkout line who gives up on making the toddler wait until after dinner and hurries to purchase the candy and give it to the toddler so they will be quiet, we usually just eat the food and tell ourselves we'll try again tomorrow.

Parenting your toddler brain in these moments takes strength and compassion. Yelling at your toddler brain in the midst of a food tantrum is as effective as yelling at your screaming toddler to stop screaming. Giving in so the toddler will be quiet is equally ineffective. It just sends the message that if you scream loud enough and long enough, you get what you want.

What your toddler brain needs to know is that you see it. You hear it. You understand why it wants a Snickers. But it's not Snickers time. Loving limits is what your toddler brain needs. Not access to whatever it yells loudest about.

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Your adult brain has the ability to see the bigger picture, to understand that Snickers don't actually satisfy our nutritional needs, that taking care of ourselves sometimes looks like pausing and choosing what we want most over what we want in the moment, that our future self is a result of what we choose now.

I remember when my kids were little, getting down on the floor with them, crouching down to their level and noticing what the world looked like from their vantage point. All they could see was knees in a crowd, the underside of a table. So many things that were out of their reach.

They would get preoccupied with bugs on the ground or dandelions because they weren't focused on where we were going. They were just focusing on what was closest to them.

Your toddler brain gets like this sometimes. Crouch down low to the ground, focused on how hard it feels in this moment like it will never end. Sometimes we need to remember to stand up to our adult brain height and see things from a higher vantage point.

There is so much more than this moment. The future is out there. Right now is just a blip on the journey. Anyone know a two-year-old? I know most people refer to that age as the terrible twos, but I always saw it as a strong assertion of independency.

It's a time when the child begins to gain command of language and a new level of physical capability and locomotion. And they are ready to start taking some control. This is such an important evolutionary drive. If we never asserted our independence and started to express free will, we would remain dependent on our caretakers and helpless in the world if they were gone.

So as frustrating as it can be for a parent when all you hear is no and I do it myself, it's a critical step on the journey of becoming a fully functional autonomous human. This toddler brain characteristic shows up on your weight loss journey as rebellion or self-sabotage.

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It's your toddler brain's reaction to restriction. It's the toddler brain's strong assertion of independence. But just like when your toddler insists they tie their own shoes, even though they have no idea how and will just end up tripping on the untied laces in five minutes, so does our rebellion overeat in response to the perceived restriction in reality create collateral damage.

The irony of our rebellion is that we are rebelling against ourselves. We are rebelling against rules we made up in our own brains. Even if we heard the rule from someone or some source outside of us, we chose to adopt the rule as our own and require ourselves to follow it.

We are both captor and captive, and all in our imaginations. It's madness. Our adult brain recognizes the truth, that what we put on our plates and into our mouths is always our choice. That eating "whatever you want" is not true freedom. It doesn't create freedom in our bodies. It doesn't create freedom in our brains. It doesn't create freedom in our lives.

Our adult brain sees what true independence and freedom looks like and feels like and what it does not. It does not look like being driven to follow cravings and feeling guilt and shame about doing it. That is chains.

It does look like being able to be around any food in any situation and choose to take care of ourselves. It looks like eating on our terms.

Parenting our toddler brain in this case takes patience and consistency. Choosing on purpose to practice the belief that you can choose to eat whatever you want, that what you put in your body is always your choice and responsibility.

You are always choosing what you eat and the consequences of those choices. Over and over again reminding yourself, I can eat whatever I want. So what do I want? What do I want to eat, and by the same token, what do I want the result of that eating to be? The toddler brain focuses only on the food, not on the consequences of that food in your body.

So parenting your toddler brain here means a willingness to look at the whole picture. The momentary pleasure and the long-term results.

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Teaching your toddler how to tie their shoes so they can do it themselves, teaching your toddler brain that it is always a choice, so your adult brain can make the choice that is best.

I am eight and a half years older than my little sister. So I kind of took on a second mom role with her. She was and is a fierce little fireball of independent spirit. And I remember when she was little, my family having some ice cream for dessert, and her wanting something that she couldn't have, or wanting to serve herself or something.

Anyway, not getting her way in essence, and her saying, more like shouting, "Fine, I won't even have any ice cream then," and stomping off to her room to pout, thinking she had really shown us all. Obviously, we were not hurt in any way by her not having ice cream. She was only hurting herself.

In fact, it was quite hilarious, and I think it's why I remember it, because it was one of those ridiculous things we do as children that makes no logical sense. Our toddler brain is not the queen of logic. Pouting is another characteristic of your toddler brain that can impede your weight loss.

It usually shows up in the form of self-pity pouting. It's not fair that other people can eat whatever they want, and I can't. Things like that. Or in I'll show them pouting, like my little sister. And it always leads to overeating, which only hurts you in the end.

Your adult brain takes responsibility for your feelings. Your adult brain knows that everybody's body is different. Your adult brain owns the choices made. Parenting your toddler brain here takes love and some levity. Of course your brain wants fairness.

If everything was fair, it would be so much easier and more comfortable. Of course your brain wants to lash out when it thinks things aren't fair. That feels totally powerless and lashing out sometimes feels like trying to gain some control.

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But focus on fairness will never yield the result we want of things being fair. There will always be people who can eat pizza every day and not gain weight. You are not one of those people and no amount of pouting will change that. It will only create unnecessary suffering for you.

Now, things are not all bad in the toddler brain realm. There are also some lessons to be learned from our toddler brain. For instance, think about a toddler learning to walk. It's actually a baby becoming a literal toddler I guess, but let's just stick with my metaphor here.

This is a new skill they have no evidence they will be able to master. They see other people doing it and they have an inner drive to continue to up-level their locomotion and so they start the process of building the muscles and skills necessary to eventually stand upright and walk.

This takes a while. If you've ever witnessed this process, it's not an overnight success. And the process literally entails near constant failure in order to succeed. The toddler needs to fall down and push themselves back up, tip over, and push themselves back up over and over and over.

This is necessary so they can build the core and the back and the shoulder and the legs muscles they need for upright balancing. They're doing in essence hundreds of pushups and squats and planks on their way back up to standing.

And the amazing part is they know this is what it will take, and they don't give up. They don't ever doubt themselves and just lay there. Sure, they get tired and they choose to crawl for a little bit, but eventually they will start pushing themselves up and trying again with very little encouragement, just because they want to do it.

This is just like weight loss. It's not a thing we do. It's a skill we build. It is an ongoing process of strengthening and improving and falling down and trying again and persevering until we figure it out. It takes time, patience, commitment, determination, desire, resilience, and perseverance, but it is 100% possible as long as you keep going.

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Sending so much love to you on your journey, my friends. You've totally got this. See you soon.

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.