

The Healing Potential of Shabbos

One of the most defining features of Orthodox Jewish life is the Shabbos; a gold mine for both the restoration and growth of a person's physical, spiritual, and psychological welfare. Interpersonally, Shabbos presents an opportunity to rekindle family relationships and friendships that can become obscured through the stress of a busy week. As the sun sets on Friday night, the bustle of everyday life melts away like the wax from the Shabbos candles, imbuing in its observer an experience the Jewish Sages referred to as *Meein Olam Habah*, or a semblance of the World to Come.

However, not all Shabboses are experienced in this idyllic way. For families under significant stress or who have difficulties coping with stress, the Shabbos can degenerate into a repository of anxiety and negative feelings. Instead of serving a detoxifying function, a stressful Shabbos can actually build upon existing stressors and accentuate problematic dynamics in the family system. For a dysfunctional family, Shabbos can amount to 24 hours of being stuck with the people who trigger you the most. For an individual with a mental illness, this type of Shabbos increases the risk using symptomatic behaviors.

An additional difficulty is in place for the individual suffering from an eating disorder. The menu of a typical Shabbos dinner or lunch is usually quite large. When we include major holidays such as Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot, we find that nearly one third of our calendar is spent, depending on the perspective, either enjoying the overflowing bounty of God's goodness, anxiously trying to avoid a binge, or becoming psychologically disorganized by an overwhelming assortment of food.

Since the meeting point between stress and food makes up a central part of the work in recovering from an eating disorder, incorporating Shabbos into one's treatment presents a major opportunity for healing for two reasons. First, the capacity to engage in the Shabbos effectively can bring about a wealth of psychological nurturance. Second, and more primary for the work of psychotherapy, the identification and removal of obstacles that prevent an effective Shabbos can lead to corrective experiences in dealing with family, feelings, and food.

The following recommendations may prove useful in harnessing the power of Shabbos to affect recovery.

- Just as in the treatment of any eating disorder, planning meals ahead of time can attenuate much stress and anxiety before meals. Planning the Shabbos meal before Wednesday can give a person time to psychologically prepare for two challenging meals. In doing so, the individual and other family involved in the preparation should be mindful that the meal is not excessive and that it meets all of the individual's exchanges.
- Minimize stress going into Shabbos. Shabbos preparations such as cleaning, cooking, and showering should be done calmly and in a way that the Shabbos is welcomed into a stress free environment.
- Reframe the Shabbos experience as an opportunity for healing. Mindfulness about the healing effects of Shabbos can be incorporated in lighting the Shabbos candles, through prayer, and even rest.

- Family members need to be supportive, but not become the ‘food police.’ Families need to make the meal as normal as possible. Dialogue should not draw attention to food, the eating disorder, or related issues such as calories, weight, body image, etc. For individuals who struggle with purging, an activity after the meal such as singing, taking a walk, or playing a game can significantly disrupt the contingency between fullness and purging.
- Should a family member have concerns of symptom use, these concerns should be addressed, but not during the meal or when “the iron is hot.” Instead, communicating concern is usually most effective when the drive for using the symptom has been diminished. Because of the shame and guilt associated with symptom use, it may also be helpful to address this in the context of family therapy through the assistance of a professional psychotherapist.

Jonathan Kirschner, M.A., is currently a Doctoral Intern at the Renfrew Center where he serves as a Primary Therapist. Jonathan’s interests include applied positive psychology, religion and mental health, and family therapy. His Doctoral research, currently underway, is focused on understanding the interface between Orthodox Judaism and disordered eating. Jonathan writes on this and related topics on his blog at www.jonathankirschner.com.