

ight Loss Secret
By Geneen Roth
Prevention

My friend Molly called me today and said, "I just ate a blueberry muffin the size of my cat. And then I decided that since I haven't let myself eat such things in a long time, I needed to add yummy side dishes of potato chips and chocolate."

After an appropriate amount of murmuring and Oh, Sweethearts, I told her I was about to write this month's column. She said, "I have an idea. How about writing about the power of kindness and self-acceptance?"

"Good idea," I said. And here we are.

People often mistake self-acceptance and tenderheartedness with indulgence, as if being kind to themselves leads to lethargy—sitting around the house in a bathrobe all day eating bonbons. This is simply not true. Think about it for a moment: When was the last time you changed your behavior—for the long term—because you threatened yourself?

Years ago I was living in an 8-by-10 shack with no hot water, an outdoor refrigerator, and an outdoor bathroom. Uh, well, not exactly bathroom. There was no bath (only a cold outdoor shower) and the toilet was in an outhouse that smelled like yesterday's cat pee.

Don't ask how I ended up there; that story is for another time. But suffice it to say that being the kind of girl who was the teeniest bit attached to indoor plumbing, I walked around generally out of sorts. I was lost and confused about what I was doing with my life.

So I did what I always did when I was lost: I ate. And ate. And ate.

And because I believed I shouldn't have been eating, and because I would never ever buy the food I wanted for myself (sweet stuff), I began inviting myself into my next-door neighbor's pantry whenever he left for work and helping myself to the granola stocked there in a big glass jar on the counter.

Stolen Granola Moments

I felt terrible about myself for stealing. My heart would be crashing as I slipped through his door; my hands would be cold when I reached for the granola, and then I'd eat it quickly, ramming it down my throat in case he returned unexpectedly. Those weren't some of my better moments.

My neighbor—a famous psychologist—was furious when he found out. Beyond furious. He wanted to wring my neck. He called me a leech, a thief, and a neurotic, dishonest good-for-nothing. And he was right to be angry. I was entering his house uninvited and

stealing his food. But shaming me didn't help me; I began telling myself that what he was saying was true, that I was hopeless and a bane to society.

had thought to be curious about why I was stealing granola when I could afford to buy it myself, I might have begun understanding that my eating was a sign of buried feelings that needed attention. Instead, I—and perhaps my neighbor—subscribed to the cultural belief that kindness leads to indulgence and that acceptance can never lead to change.

When, years later, I finally understood that being interested in and tender with myself wouldn't lull me into staying in bed for 6 years watching TV and eating pizza, something in me relaxed. I felt as if there were someone at home in my body—someone who accepted me as I was. Because of this acceptance and interest, I could, paradoxically, stop my behavior. I didn't need to keep acting out to get my or someone else's attention: I already had it.

I often hear a variation on this statement: "If I'm not intolerant of my shortcomings, how can I ever expect to change them?" The truth is, real change only happens when you're kind to yourself.

It's All about You

From childhood, we're conditioned to believe that we only change when forced. We learn to mistrust our intentions and think that if we give ourselves enough rope, we'll hang ourselves.

Karen Russell weighed 424 pounds when I met her. "Telling me I could trust myself with food or feelings was like handing an ax to an ax murderer. That's how I got myself into this mess," she said. "No," I replied, "you got yourself into this mess by not trusting yourself. By repeatedly depriving yourself and then bingeing. After enough binges, you felt like you could devour the universe. Who would trust a carton of ice cream with anyone who could devour the universe?"

After a few months of practicing self-kindness—such as telling her family that they weren't allowed to comment on her weight and eating exactly what she wanted—she got the hang of it. She started losing weight. Eventually, she treated herself with such kindness that she lost 300 pounds.

In *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*, Sharon Salzberg writes that we believe that "if we abuse our minds enough with self-hatred and self-condemnation, somehow that abuse will be a path that liberates us, [but] generosity coming from self-hatred becomes martyrdom."

The only way to learn the difference between self-indulgence and self-kindness is to experience what self-kindness feels like. Declare it "Be Kind to Me" day, and get out there and start treating yourself as if you deserve every good thing. Because, in fact, you do.