

Shrink Rap: Gag Me With a Spoon

By Steven Hendlin, Ph.D.

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Perhaps it escaped your attention that Sonya "The Black Widow" Thomas trounced all the men to win the chili cheese fry eating contest held recently on the Queen Mary. She scarfed down over eight pounds of greasy fries in ten minutes. Thomas proudly explains that her nick-name comes from "eating up" the men she competes with, just like a black widow spider consumes the male after mating.

For those who don't follow the "sport" of competitive eating, Thomas is an attractive 37 year old slightly built Korean-American weighing only 105 pounds who works as a manager in a fast-food joint. Ranked number two in the world of speed-binge eaters, she has bolted down that ranking by setting records in such categories as Vienna sausage (8.31 lbs in 10 minutes); deep fried asparagus (5.75 lbs in 10 minutes); chicken nuggets (80 in 5 minutes); chicken wings (167 in 32 minutes); and hard boiled eggs (65 in 6 minutes, 40 seconds, thus obliterating Paul Newman's record of 50 in an hour, set back in 1967 in *Cool Hand Luke*).

It isn't just coincidental that competitive eating is gaining popularity in a time of rampant adolescent and adult obesity. Backed by corporate sponsor dollars for advertising and prize money, cities around the country are lining up to host eating contests. The Fox network has televised the "Glutton Bowl," with commentators analyzing contestant eating styles, in an attempt to give pseudo-legitimacy to the gurgitators. But it isn't only the eaters who end up englutted, it's also the corporate sponsors themselves, who've found yet another way to market their nutritionally bereft junk-food products to exactly those they are trying to reach.

Although kids are told "don't try this at home," the real message comes through in the questionable practice of a brand like Kellogg's interviewing "The Black Widow" for their kids' website. She says not to try speed-binging until you reach age 18. But pushing Frosted Flakes, MacDonald's, and interviewing a minor celebrity who happens to eat fast food as part of her training regimen clearly gives kids the message speed-binging is a good thing, something to mimic in their own eating habits. Admonishing a kid to wait until he's 18 just motivates him more to try speed-gorging himself now on a humongous burger just like he sees guy doing on a current TV commercial.

Promoters depict speed-binging as fun, a spectator sport, and something you, too, can participate in if you've got the stretched out stomach for it. Not only that, it can make you famous and even earn you a cool nickname if you can belly up to the table with the big boys.

While gastroenterologists would love to study how competitive eaters are able to speed-binge before experiencing a "reversal of fortune" (as they euphemistically refer to vomiting), psychologists have been slow to comment on the dynamics of those who choose to participate. Along with alcohol, smoking and graphic violence, glorifying binge eating is among the worst kinds of messages we can give kids and teenagers. It directly sanctions bingeing and purging, the hallmarks of bulimia.

Help your children avoid the trap of glorifying speed-binging by explaining to them that what they see these people doing is unhealthy — that stuffing quantities of food in quickly can cause plenty of unpleasant side effects and medical problems. Teach them about good diet and refrain from modeling over-eating or eating too quickly. List the problems that come with obesity, and make sure they understand that without purging and a lot of exercise, anyone participating in contests regularly is eating far too many calories to maintain a healthy weight. Explain to them the serious risks of heart attack and diabetes being taken by some of the extremely obese contestants. Point out that two of the best known on the circuit both weigh in around 400 pounds and show them a video of how disgusting it is to watch these guys eat. Finally, explain to them that distinguishing themselves as good students is a much healthier way to get attention than having their friends watch them stuff themselves with food.

There is a dark side to the speed-binging craze that goes beyond the humorous approach taken by most promoters and journalists. We've stuffed ourselves to the gills on conspicuous consumption — is it any wonder we would turn something so conspicuous and consuming as the spectacle of self-engorgement into a sport?