



How NOT to Lose Weight - Starving so your kids can eat.

Ramona was a single mother with three children, two of them pre-school age. She worked two minimum wage jobs in South Chicago to support her little family. Despite her mother's advanced diabetes, grandma would take the bus over to watch the kids while Ramona worked. On days when grandma was too sick to come over, Ramona either had to skip work, or her oldest daughter had to stay home from second grade to watch the other two.

One day grandma had an emergency doctors appointment and couldn't come over until "noon at the earliest." Ramona's oldest daughter was already in school. She needed cash so badly that she couldn't afford to take any more time off work. Besides, in that cold Chicago winter, Ramona feared she could lose a job she desperately needed if she was late or missed another morning.



She crossed the hall to press her elderly and reluctant neighbor to "look in on the little ones" from "time to time." With no credit and no cash to feed her kids, Ramona felt she had no other choice. Two pre-school kids home alone... with a TV set for a babysitter... a reluctant neighbor across the hall... walking to work in the snow that

heat-rendering morning, Ramona could only pray with each step she took that her children would be safe until grandma arrived “around noontime.”

After all these years that wrenching decision, made on a dark January morning, still haunted her. But it was just one day among many in those lean years, as Ramona opened up and shared more with me.

Feeding America, and Ramona

I met Ramona a few years ago when I was in Chicago on a blustery Spring day to meet top executives of America's Second Harvest. Now called **Feeding America** (<http://feedingamerica.org/>) it is a premiere resource to feed the hungry in America. According to the latest data, in the majority of states **one in six American kids is "food insecure"** – their parents don't know where their child's next meal is coming from.

Feeding America is the largest network of food banks in the nation. Yet it is just one of hundreds of food banks in every part of this great country (and still there is not enough food to go around).



Receiving donated food from major food manufacturers and grocery store chains, as well as supporting scores of local food drives, they feed those who would otherwise go hungry. For America's hundreds of thousands on food stamps, it supplements an otherwise meager cupboard – a last resort.

Starving to feed her kids

During those lean times, when the kids were still quite young, Ramona started getting extra food from America's Second Harvest, (now Feeding America), South Chicago's main food bank. Many days, especially at the end of the month before her next paycheck came in, and after the food stamps were all consumed, Ramona's "supermarket shopping" consisted of whatever was available at the food bank. For several days each month it was the ONLY food her family had. Without a credit card, when the food wouldn't stretch, Ramona didn't eat.

I got a chance to talk to Ramona over a quiet box lunch in Feeding America's Chicago conference room. A bright and cheery woman in her mid-forty's, she now worked at Feeding America, after years of being one of it's recipients.

Ramona had taken night classes working on her college degree in social work. It took her most of 12 years to get it done, while working at a variety of part time jobs, usually two a day. Studying late into the evening after the kids were in bed, around finals time the lights didn't go out until the wee hours of the morning. Ramona knew the only way she was going to be able to break the cycle of hunger and deprivation for her kids was to get a degree. "I had to learn my way out of it," she said.

But there were days, she told me, many, many days, when education seemed like an indulgent luxury. College meant less time with the kids, and less money for necessities, when the kids desperately needed more of both.

All during this conversation with me Ramona was very matter-of-fact. Her dark eyes would peer into mine as she wanted me to understand the



great pride she had that her kids were doing so well at school. She opened her wallet pictures to tell me something special and dear about each.

Shopping for food at a food bank

Then Ramona said something surprising. Knowing my background, and why I was there, she said, "**You know, starving so your kids can eat is the surest way I know to gain weight.**"

She explained how frequently her food stamps would run out about three weeks into the month, so she would take them to the food bank to "shop." Sometimes the only food on the partially empty shelves were starchy boxed foods, canned vegetables full of salt, sugary cereals, or foods with high fat content. "Healthy" eating wasn't an option. Eating was – whatever you could get.

Then, when finally the food stamps came again, feeling deprived and hungry, Ramona's family ate more than they should. Fresh produce, she said, was their favorite, and rare "treat."



Ramona gained about 80 extra pounds in those lean years, she told me matter-of-factly. Her kids had become overweight, too. Now only a couple of years off food stamps, she had lost some of her extra weight, and was intent on losing the rest. One thing she knew for sure, "Not eating is the best way I know to gain weight," she repeated.

Finally getting her college degree, she went to work for Feeding America, with a passion for helping others eat – to make sure kids got fed, and their mothers too, when they have no other option.

Her story and countless others like hers finally got the food producers and

grocery stores to find ways to bring more fresh produce to the shelves of America's food banks. There is never enough, but at least there are a few more “treats” to go around.

Eating less and healthy weight loss

To eat less is not a weight loss strategy for many among us. It is survival. It is saving the food you would eat so your children can eat. And, in addition to the reality that this type of weight loss leads to weight gain, it is also a tragedy that hunger is all too present – and hidden – among us.

Hopefully, as you read this, you don't need to eat less just to feed your children.

But, there is a lot of truth to what Ramona said. Your body undergoes a lot of changes when you don't eat enough consistently. Your body needs a rich assortment of nutrients from a wide variety of sources. And the fresher that food is, the less processed it is, the better it is for your body. And for your weight.

When I talk about eating less, here, it means lowering the number of calories you consume, but not drastically. If you are overweight and cut 200-300 calories out of your daily diet, you will lose weight. Going from 2200 calories a day to 1900 is not about starving yourself. (Going down to 1000 calories a day is stupid and counter-productive. And the hCG- style of just 500 calories a day is a dangerous form of insanity...but, I digress.)

When you consistently over-eat by just a little, you gain a little, steadily. When you eat a little less regularly, you lose weight, steadily.

Eating less means making wise food choices. It is about being aware of not only what you put in your mouth, but how much.

Losing weight is a mindful choice. A choice you make one bite at a time.

Without credit or cash, eating less like Ramona could force you to face hunger. If your situation is a bit better off than that, eating less (in the right way), is a sure path to healthy weight loss. Isn't that what you have been looking for?



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– Boyd Jentzsch

PS: Ramona's story touches me every time I revisit it. Sadly, her story is not the only one like it. There are tens of thousands of others like her's. And more every day. If you would like to help feed a family or two through their challenging times, donate to your local food bank. Or contact **Feeding America** (<http://feedingamerica.org/>). Put fresh produce on someone's table tonight. If you don't help the kids, and their desperate moms, who will?

Learn more about food insecurity in America here:

Witnesses to Hunger: A portrait of food insecurity in America

<http://eatocracy.cnn.com/2011/09/22/witnesses-to-hunger-the-faces-of-food-insecurity-in-america/>

Five Shocking Statistics About Hunger

<http://eatocracy.cnn.com/2011/02/25/55-jilly-stephens-executive-director-of-city-harvest/>

Childhood malnutrition has long lasting effects

<http://eatocracy.cnn.com/2011/09/26/childhood-malnutrition-has-long-lasting-effects/>

PPS: For those of us concentrated on managing our weight by eating less, it is a heart wrenching irony to know that for too many, eating less is not a choice. For their kids, not knowing what mommy is going to make for dinner, going to bed hungry, or skipping breakfast is a way of life they live daily. And tomorrow will not likely be any better.

Images: Courtesy of Ford, Tucson Citizen, American Red Cross, Google Images

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