

Skills, Habits, and the Illusion of Powerlessness Over Food

(Glenn Livingston Ph.D. and Howie Jacobson, Ph.D.)

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Dr. Glenn: Hey, this is the very good Glenn Livingston with NeverBingeAgain.com and I'm here with the wonderful, the wondrous, the always surprising, Howie Jacobson. Dr. Howie Jacobson, how are you Howie? PlantYourself.com.

Howie: I'm very good. I'm the very good Howie Jacobson, right?

Dr. Glenn: You're the Howie. You are the Howie. And Howie asked me if I would spend a little time with him today talking about the difference between a skill and a habit. He wanted to borrow my brain to kind of parse it out and he had some thoughts about it. So why don't we just jump into that? Howie, what was it that got you thinking in this direction?



Howie:

A couple of things. So I do a lot of coaching and teaching around healthy behaviors, healthy habits. And as you know, one of the main tools in my toolbox is Never Binge Again. So, I've been doing a lot of coaching where people, they don't succeed a hundred percent. They understand it and they'll come back. Especially like this week, a lot of people have written in the forum, in the program that I'm running, that they had a rough day, they had a fight with someone at work and they came back and they ordered the nacho jalapeno cheese poppers, various things like that.

People have these failures. And they are very hard on themselves because they feel like it's just like a habit that they can't manage to keep. And there's something about when you establish a new habit, you feel like it's sort of a moral imperative, like if I have a habit to get up in the morning and brush my teeth or floss or walk two miles, there's nothing stopping me from doing it except the junk in my head or I'm lazy or I'm weak or something like that. And then I was listening yesterday to a podcast for my friend, Peter Bregman, the Bregman Leadership Podcast, and I can't remember which episode because I binge-listened yesterday. But one of his guests was talking about the difference between a skill and a habit and that suddenly struck me that maybe people are mistaken. Maybe they think about the health changes they want to make, the behavioral changes they want to make, the lifestyle changes just like something you could turn on an off when in fact, it's more like learning to play the guitar or being able to run a sub-four-hour marathon, things you really need to train for to practice and get good at and you can't expect to succeed at some high level the very first time. And I'm wondering what you think about that.



Dr. Glenn: Well, I do have some thoughts about that. In my book, I talk a lot about paradox of the requirement of having a totally different mindset before versus after a mistake. And I think on a practical basis, if you were to observe what people do with Never Binge Again from the outside -- successful people, people who succeed with it -- you would say they're developing a skill. There's virtually nobody who does perfectly from the outside, maybe someone who had a gastric bypass, is facing a horrible cancer operation or something like that and really needs to be perfectly a hundred percent forever. I've had people who just get it and stay with it, but the vast majority of people, they glom on to the clarity of thinking that it provides. They glom on to the ability to separate their destructive selves from their constructive selves to define who they want to be and the type of person that they want to be in the world and they get very excited about that, but for them, it is a skill which develops over time and they're thinking gets sharper and sharper and I think Jack Trimpey even calls it an algorithm, where you draw this black and white line in the sand and once you've drawn that, even if you step over that line, you know exactly where the line is. You start to be able to hear that little voice in your head that tells you to step over the line. You're able to therefore isolate the moment in time when you did step over the line and figure out what that happened; did you not recognize something the pig was saying? Did you recognize it and just decide to do it anyway? Because as we talked about before, nobody can stop you but you from bingeing. There's nobody who can stop you but you. But you can stop you if you have this clarity of mind and crystal clear line in the sand and ability to hear the voice.

I guess the short answer would be, yes, it's a mental skill that you're developing but part of that skill is thoroughly embracing the idea that it's part of your character, already occurred because the danger is, if you say this is a skill which you need to perfect overtime and that you



should only expect progress of yourself and not perfection, then you're really feeding the pig's notion that, "All I really need to do is deal with this for a little while until I don't feel like it anymore." It's almost like part of the skill requires that we think of it as a perfect habit we've already developed.

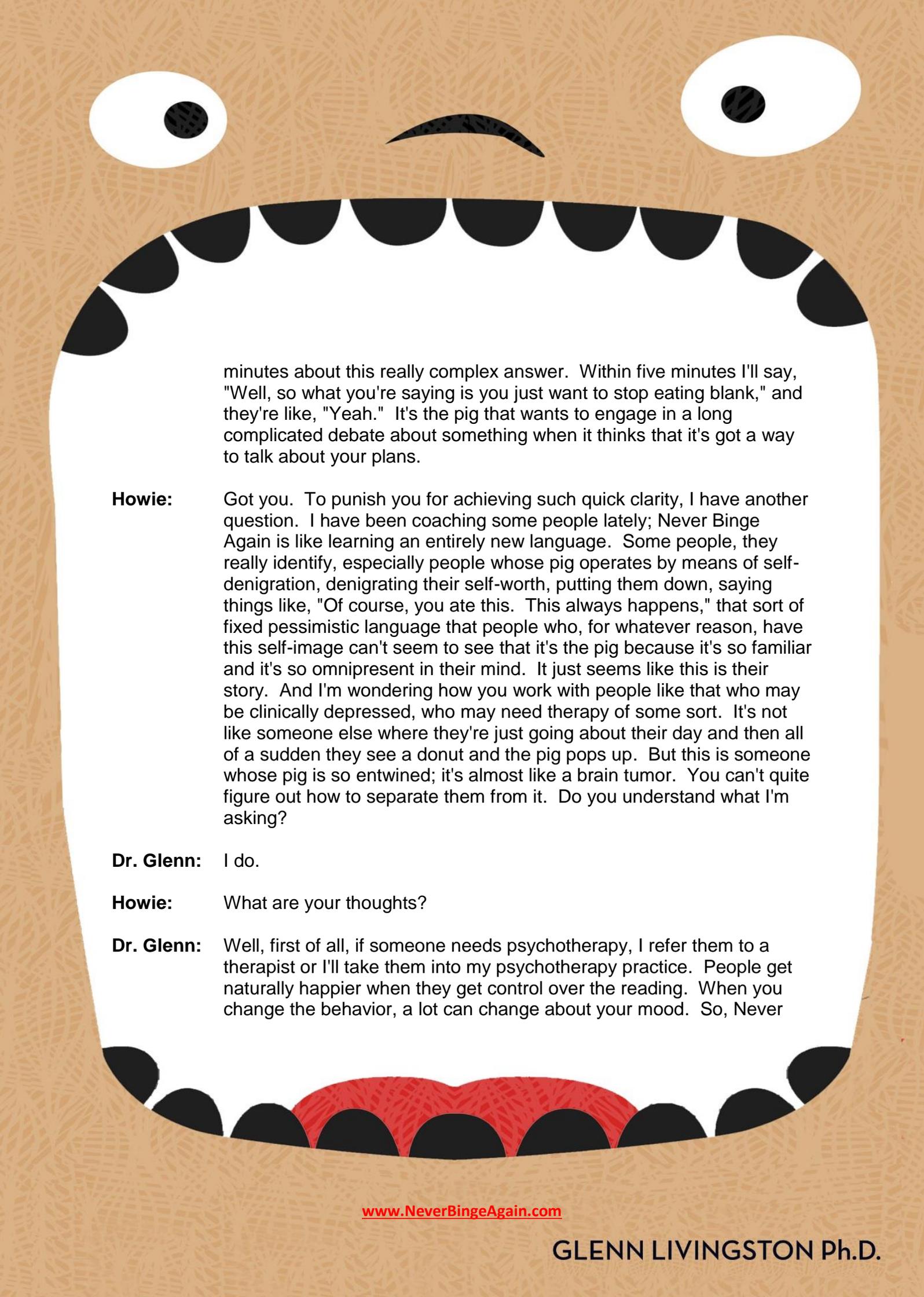
Howie: So it's the before the binge and after the binge, two completely different ways of looking at that event. The before is like it's not going to happen because if we don't adopt that stance of, this is a line in the sand, this is not going to happen, then we don't get to practice, right? So we don't get to develop the skill.

Dr. Glenn: You don't get to develop the skill and that's a good way to put it. You don't get to practice. It's back to the analogy of riding your bike up a hill or your little nine-year-old daughter is trying to ride a bike up a hill the first time, and if she doesn't visualize herself on the top victorious and push all of the doubt out of her mind, she's unlikely to make it to the top because there's going to be this little voice in the back of her mind saying, "This is too hard; and progress, not perfection. You made it just a little further this time."

But if she visualizes herself with her arms way up in the air, breathing the cool air at the top of the hill and any little voice that suggests that she's not going to do it, she ascribes to this inner enemy and therefore completely rejects it, she's infinitely more likely to make her goal.

Howie: Got you! Well, that was a very clean and short answer to what I thought was going to be a bunch of longer complicated discussion.

Dr. Glenn: You know, it's funny, I constantly have these coaching sessions with people where they were sure they were going to talk to me for 45



minutes about this really complex answer. Within five minutes I'll say, "Well, so what you're saying is you just want to stop eating blank," and they're like, "Yeah." It's the pig that wants to engage in a long complicated debate about something when it thinks that it's got a way to talk about your plans.

Howie: Got you. To punish you for achieving such quick clarity, I have another question. I have been coaching some people lately; Never Binge Again is like learning an entirely new language. Some people, they really identify, especially people whose pig operates by means of self-denigration, denigrating their self-worth, putting them down, saying things like, "Of course, you ate this. This always happens," that sort of fixed pessimistic language that people who, for whatever reason, have this self-image can't seem to see that it's the pig because it's so familiar and it's so omnipresent in their mind. It just seems like this is their story. And I'm wondering how you work with people like that who may be clinically depressed, who may need therapy of some sort. It's not like someone else where they're just going about their day and then all of a sudden they see a donut and the pig pops up. But this is someone whose pig is so entwined; it's almost like a brain tumor. You can't quite figure out how to separate them from it. Do you understand what I'm asking?

Dr. Glenn: I do.

Howie: What are your thoughts?

Dr. Glenn: Well, first of all, if someone needs psychotherapy, I refer them to a therapist or I'll take them into my psychotherapy practice. People get naturally happier when they get control over the reading. When you change the behavior, a lot can change about your mood. So, Never



Binge Again is a mood elevator, but it's not really intended to treat a mental disorder, so I'll refer them to a psychologist or psychiatrist or also take them on myself into my practice if they really want to do that; into my psychological practice, not my Never Binge Again coaching practice.

But probably the best way to illustrate this would be to role play it. Would you be willing to role play one of those depressed people and let me coach you through it?

Howie: Sure.

Dr. Glenn: So, can you give this person a name?

Howie: Let's call her Alice.

Dr. Glenn: And Alice, it's nice to talk to you today. I was looking forward to the call. I'm all set up.

Howie: Okay, yeah. Well, thanks for taking the time to talk to me.

Dr. Glenn: Update me. What's been going on? Fill me in.

Howie: I understand, I listened to the book three times, the audio book, and I think I get it, but the pig always wins. I just can't seem to stick with it and just -- you know, I feel bad and I've been struggling with this my whole life and it's just not getting any better. Yeah,

Dr. Glenn: Can you give me an example?



Howie: Yeah. Yesterday, I was at the office and somebody had a birthday party and they brought in a sheet cake and I was on my third piece before I even thought about it. It's like, you know, I have a rule. It's not like -- it's like the pig just takes over. The pig takes over and I have no choice, I have no say. And then later on I feel terrible because of what happened.

Dr. Glenn: The pig says you have no say. The pig says that it's much more powerful than you and you've got absolutely no say in the matter.

Howie: Yeah, yeah.

Dr. Glenn: What is the rule that you have that would have protected you in that situation if you didn't believe the pig's words?

Howie: I don't need any processed sugar, any processed sweets.

Dr. Glenn: Is that the specific rule? How is it worded? I will never have processed sugar again?

Howie: Yeah.

Dr. Glenn: Could you say it?

Howie: Yeah, I will never have processed sugar again.

Dr. Glenn: If you go back to the first bite, do you recall hearing anything that the pig told you?

Howie: It's like that it wasn't a me. It's just the pig. I don't even remember. It was there and of course I was going to eat it.



Dr. Glenn: What kind of sheet cake was it?

Howie: It was a yellow sheet cake with vanilla frosting.

Dr. Glenn: And who brought it in?

Howie: Pam did.

Dr. Glenn: What did Pam look like yesterday?

Howie: She was wearing like some sort of -- I don't know, red pant suit.

Dr. Glenn: And how many people were at the table while you were eating the sheet cake?

Howie: I was at my desk. I just walked into the break room and just took a piece, went back to my desk and then they were still in there, so I went back for seconds and thirds.

Dr. Glenn: How much cake was left when you went back for seconds and thirds?

Howie: It's like half, a third, you know, like plenty.

Dr. Glenn: What kind of knife did they have to cut the cake?

Howie: It was just like a cheap old knife that you got with a plastic set, like an eight-inch chef knife with a plastic handle.

Dr. Glenn: And was there room on your desk to put the cake down or did you have to clear the room -- you have to clear out the room for it?



Howie: I just pushed the keyboard forward towards the monitor.

Dr. Glenn: Do you remember what was on the screen, what you were working on when that happened?

Howie: Well, it was lunchtime, so I had Facebook up.

Dr. Glenn: Do you remember whose post you were reading just before you had the cake?

Howie: I think it was my sister-in-law. She just posted some pictures of their vacation.

Dr. Glenn: How many people were on these pictures? Just your sister-in-law or your sister-in-law's family?

Howie: Yes, the family mostly; two kids, husband.

Dr. Glenn: How much time did you spend eating the cake?

Howie: Yeah, the first piece was like 45 seconds.

Dr. Glenn: Wolf it down in about 45 seconds?

Howie: Yeah.

Dr. Glenn: What about the second and third?

Howie: Well, those were a little smaller, but I guess maybe a little longer, maybe a minute and a half, two minutes.



Dr. Glenn: What did it taste like?

Howie: I don't know. I wasn't paying attention. It was sweet and the icing was very fatty. I remember it was cold because it came out of the fridge.

Dr. Glenn: How big is that fridge?

Howie: It's sort of the smallish, regular size, like a kitchen fridge, not like a college dorm fridge.

Dr. Glenn: When you finished the third piece, how did you know that you were done?

Howie: I started getting a stomach ache.

Dr. Glenn: Where did you feel that in your stomach? In your upper stomach or your lower stomach?

Howie: It was upper, just under the rib cage, like where the third piece kind of got stuck, like there wasn't any more room for it.

Dr. Glenn: It's a lot of detail for somebody who wasn't there. Are you aware of that? I don't mean to make you uncomfortable. I'm just trying to point out that the pig is telling you that you weren't there. The pig is telling you that it has the ability to knock you unconscious, but you were there the whole time.

Howie: Oh, I see what you're doing.

Dr. Glenn: See?



Howie: Yeah.

Dr. Glenn: Told me what kind of knife it was, what color the cake was, what you did in the first bite, the second bite, the third bite, who was there, what you were looking at on Facebook, you had to push a monitor away. It's like there was a video recorder going the whole time you were there. The pig is lying to you. The pig is telling that it's got the power to knock you out, but you were there.

Howie: Oh. So why wasn't I there standing up for my rule?

Dr. Glenn: Tell me.

Howie: Because I didn't want to. I wanted the cake.

Dr. Glenn: Yeah. You didn't fail. You succeeded in doing something that you wanted to do. You wanted the cake and you decided that you wanted to let the pig out. You're allowed to do that if you want to. You're allowed to change your mind if you really want to.

Howie: But I don't really want to.

Dr. Glenn: So what do you want to do about it now?

Howie: I want to figure out some way that the next time that happens, I feel like I have the power to say no.

Dr. Glenn: Are you going to do that or not? You're going to say no or not?

Howie: I wish I could say I know the answer to that. It didn't feel like a choice.



Dr. Glenn: The pig would prefer that you didn't have a choice. Do you know why the pig would prefer you didn't have a choice?

Howie: Well then the pig would rule.

Dr. Glenn: Yeah. So it can binge. The pig doesn't want you to have a choice so it can binge. We always have a choice.

Howie: Okay.

Dr. Glenn: I don't want you to just play [inaudible 00:13:09].

Howie: So next time there's a party in the office, I'm going to look at the cake and I'm going to notice what kind of cake it is and then I'll remind myself I'm here, it's me, I get to choose.

Dr. Glenn: Do you want to do that?

Howie: Yeah. Yeah, I don't want to keep bingeing.

Dr. Glenn: Yeah, I think you do, too. I think that's what you want also. How confident are you that you're never going to binge again?

Howie: Sixty percent.

Dr. Glenn: What's the pig telling you? What do you hear?

Howie: Just look at your history. You've said this before. You've made this kind of statements before and you always binge.



Dr. Glenn: Well, have there been any great accomplishments in this world that people really succeeded on their first try?

Howie: No.

Dr. Glenn: Is it a sign of strength or weakness that you keep getting up to try again?

Howie: I guess strength. And I know people who just gave up.

Dr. Glenn: How confident are you that you're never going to binge again?

Howie: I want to tell you a hundred percent, but it doesn't feel like the truth.

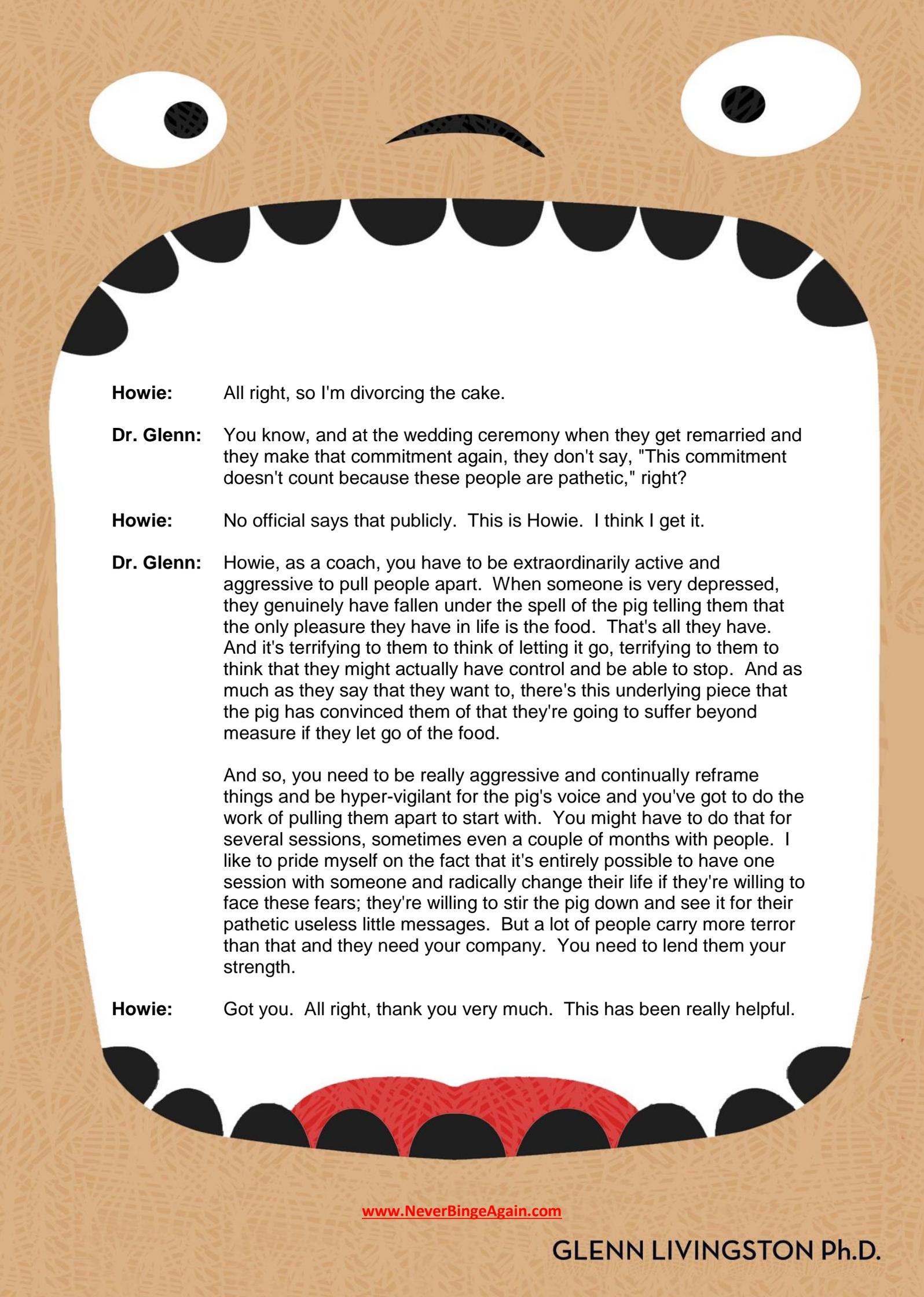
Dr. Glenn: How come?

Howie: Because I keep bingeing.

Dr. Glenn: You've binged an awful lot in the past, you kept bingeing, you changed your mind a thousand times.

Howie: Yeah. I mean, I don't have to change my mind again.

Dr. Glenn: Some people get remarried even after they got divorced. Our society still considers that to be a legitimate commitment. They don't say, "Well, you said you were going to stay married and you didn't stay married so therefore you can't stay married." They say, "You want to get remarried, go ahead. We'll honor that. We'll issue you a court document, we'll witness it, we'll bless it." Some people get remarried. Some people even get married and divorced two, three times with the same person. It's not unheard of.



Howie: All right, so I'm divorcing the cake.

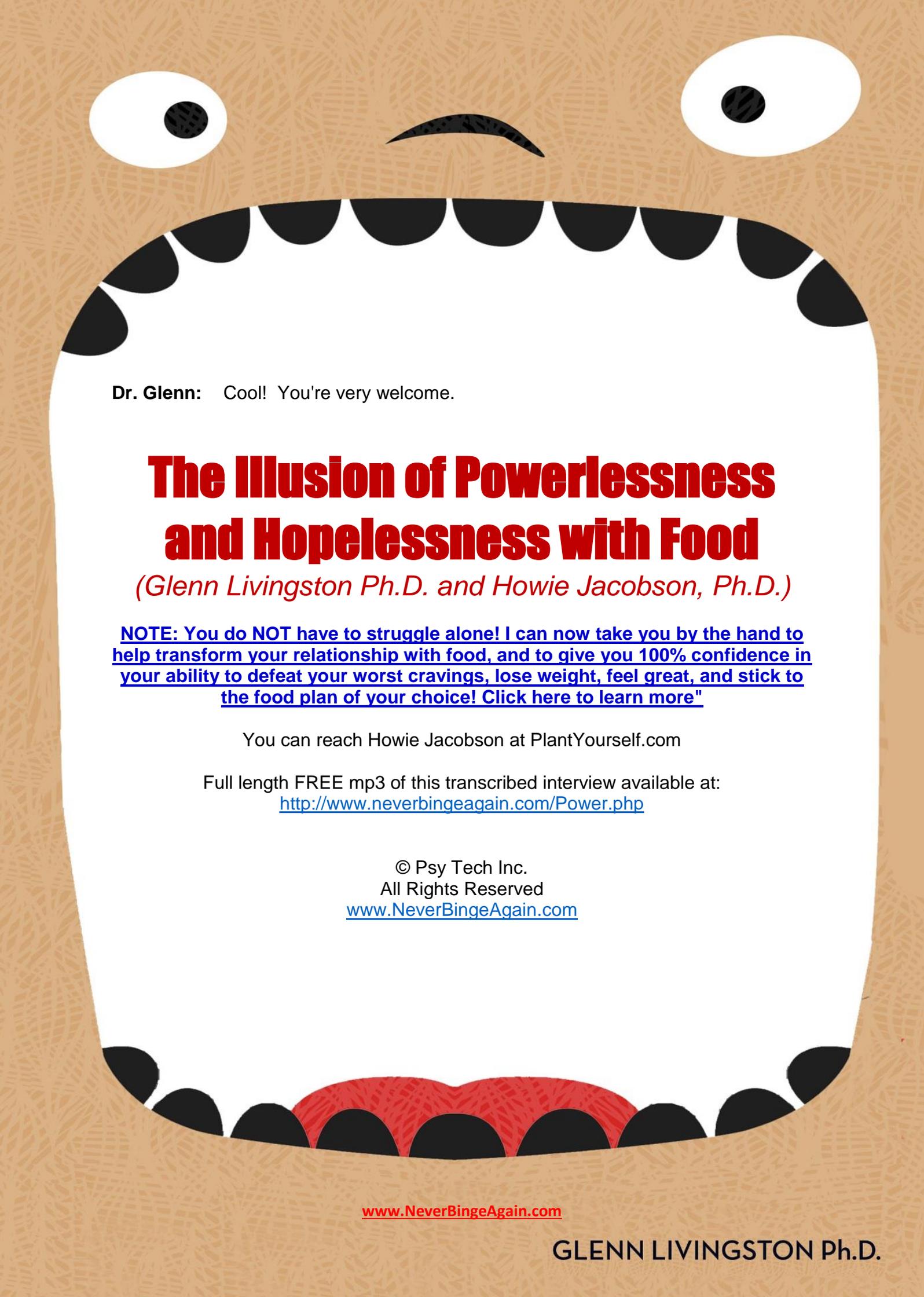
Dr. Glenn: You know, and at the wedding ceremony when they get remarried and they make that commitment again, they don't say, "This commitment doesn't count because these people are pathetic," right?

Howie: No official says that publicly. This is Howie. I think I get it.

Dr. Glenn: Howie, as a coach, you have to be extraordinarily active and aggressive to pull people apart. When someone is very depressed, they genuinely have fallen under the spell of the pig telling them that the only pleasure they have in life is the food. That's all they have. And it's terrifying to them to think of letting it go, terrifying to them to think that they might actually have control and be able to stop. And as much as they say that they want to, there's this underlying piece that the pig has convinced them of that they're going to suffer beyond measure if they let go of the food.

And so, you need to be really aggressive and continually reframe things and be hyper-vigilant for the pig's voice and you've got to do the work of pulling them apart to start with. You might have to do that for several sessions, sometimes even a couple of months with people. I like to pride myself on the fact that it's entirely possible to have one session with someone and radically change their life if they're willing to face these fears; they're willing to stir the pig down and see it for their pathetic useless little messages. But a lot of people carry more terror than that and they need your company. You need to lend them your strength.

Howie: Got you. All right, thank you very much. This has been really helpful.



Dr. Glenn: Cool! You're very welcome.

The Illusion of Powerlessness and Hopelessness with Food

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