



## HOW TO CHANGE YOUR EMOTIONAL EATING HABITS

### Introduction

Many people have their strongest food cravings when they are experiencing emotional stress. This can be good stress or bad stress. When life events that are emotionally demanding occur, it is hard to cope with the feelings of stress and anxiety. Some people turn to food to help them get through these times. This may be done consciously or unconsciously when facing a difficult problem, or simply when looking to stay occupied.

Emotional eating can really sabotage your efforts for weight loss. Often, emotional eating leads to consuming too much food: especially foods that are high calorie, high fat, salty and sweet. Eating as a way to suppress or soothe negative emotions, such as stress, anger, anxiety, boredom, sadness and loneliness is hard to change, but can be done with preparation and effort. You must learn to recognize emotional triggers, and to channel negative energy into something productive. Many people blame themselves and their lack of willpower for over-eating, but the blame can often be put on lack of self-awareness. You need to become aware of what drives you to overeat.

Both major life events and minor life events can affect your eating habits. Events as major as unemployment, death, health problems, divorce, marriage, having a baby or events as small as, having a bad day can trigger emotions that lead to overeating.

### The Food & Mood Connection

There are some foods that have addictive qualities. When certain emotions are triggered you may start to crave foods that give you a “high” or foods that comfort you. Chocolate can be very addictive because it can help increase mood and feelings of satisfaction which elevates hormone levels (sugar high). This reward may trigger food preferences closely associated with specific feelings. The pleasure of eating offsets negative emotions.

You also have to be aware of food used to distract feelings. If you are worried about upcoming events or issues you are dealing with, you may look to food to distract you from dealing with your emotions. You find comfort in food because it can take you away from your negative feelings. Emotional eaters tend to overeat when they are feeling a strong emotion like anger or depression.

Boredom can also play a large role in poor eating habits. Some people automatically eat when they get home from work, simply out of habit. Eating can also be triggered out of the blue - the emotional eater all of a sudden feels like they are starving for food. Recognize these feelings, and associate them with their eating patterns and habits.

Emotional eating can quickly make problems or negative emotions multiply. Instead of dealing with your feelings, you are stuffing them down with food, adding issues such as weight gain, guilt about eating, and poor health to your list of worries.

**Tip!** In the next pages, we will discuss important strategies for overcoming emotional eating. Using these strategies, set a S.M.A.R.T. goal for yourself to deal with your emotional eating. Remember, S.M.A.R.T. goals are:

**Specific** – Answers the five “W”s –who, what, where, when, why.

**Measureable** - Establish concrete material for measuring progress toward the attainment of each goal you set.

**Attainable** - You can attain any goal when you plan your steps wisely & really brainstorm methods to stay accountable.

**Realistic** - To be realistic, a goal must represent an objective toward which you are both *willing* and *able* to work.

**Timely** - A goal should be grounded within a specific time frame – both short and long term.



## Strategies to End Emotional Eating

### 1. Learn to Recognize True Hunger

Is your hunger physical or emotional? If you ate a few hours ago and don't have a rumbling stomach, you're probably not "truly" hungry. Give the cravings a few minutes to pass.



Emotional Hunger	Physical Hunger
<p><b>Is sudden...</b> One minute you're not even thinking about food, the next minute you're starving.</p> <p><b>Is specific...</b> You crave a specific food like pasta, chocolate, or a cheese burger. You have trouble substituting the food for something else.</p> <p><b>Starts in the mouth and mind...</b> Your mouth wants to taste the food and your mind wanders through thoughts about your desired food.</p> <p><b>Is urgent...</b> Emotional hunger urges you to eat now. There is a desire to instantly ease emotional pain with food.</p> <p><b>Is paired with an emotion...</b> Your boss yelled at you, your child is in trouble at school - Emotional hunger is in conjunction with stress or an emotional situation.</p> <p><b>Involves absent-minded or automatic eating...</b> You may not realize that you have eaten an entire bag of cookies.</p> <p><b>Doesn't respond to fullness...</b> May stem from a desire to cover up painful feelings. You stuff yourself to deaden emotion, and may eat so much that your stomach hurts.</p> <p><b>Feels guilty...</b> The paradox about emotional eating is that a person eats to feel better, and then berates themselves for eating.</p>	<p><b>Is gradual...</b> Your stomach rumbles. One hour later it begins to growl. You have progressive clues that you are hungry.</p> <p><b>Is open to different foods...</b> You may have specific food preferences, but they are flexible.</p> <p><b>Starts in the stomach...</b> Your hunger starts from stomach sensations. You feel gnawing, rumbling, emptiness, and even pain in your stomach with physical hunger.</p> <p><b>Is patient...</b> Physical hunger would prefer that you ate soon, but it does not command you to eat right at that very instant.</p> <p><b>Happens out of physical need...</b> Hunger occurs because it has been 3 or 4 hours since your last meal. You may have light-headedness or low energy if you are extremely hungry.</p> <p><b>Involves deliberate choices and awareness...</b> You are aware of the food on your fork, in your mouth, and in your stomach. You can make the choice to eat either half a sandwich or the whole thing.</p> <p><b>Stops when full...</b> Physical hunger stems from a desire to fuel and nourish the body. As soon as that intention is fulfilled, you stop eating.</p> <p><b>Realizes eating is necessary...</b> When the intent behind eating is based in physical hunger, there is no guilt or shame associated with the eating.</p>

This chart is from *Constant craving: What Your Food Cravings mean and how to overcome them*, by Doreen virtue, Ph.D., published by Hay House, Inc., 1995



- ✓ Try to always eat in the same spot. This will increase your awareness of not only *what* you are eating, but the process of eating as well. In addition, avoid eating in front of the TV.

- ✓ To help determine if your hunger is physical or emotional, try asking yourself questions like "*When was the last time I ate?*" "*Was I hungry 10 minutes ago, or is this sudden?*" "*Do I need to eat this specific food, or can I substitute it for something else?*"

## 2. Identify Your Emotional Triggers

Emotional eaters must become aware of their motivations for wanting to eat. This awareness is important in determining if your stomach is actually empty, or if you are upset about something and want to eat to make yourself feel better. It is important to analyze the feelings you have when you are hungry.

- ✓ A great way to be more aware of your emotions surrounding food is to keep a journal and record how you feel before you eat. Write down what you eat, how much you eat, when you eat, how you're feeling when you eat and how hungry you are. Over time, you may see patterns emerge that reveal negative eating patterns and triggers to avoid.

### Top Five Emotional Eating Triggers

- Stress and Anxiety
- Loneliness
- Anger
- PMS
- Sadness and Depression

## 3. Look Elsewhere For Comfort

Do not go into the kitchen right away when you feel hunger pangs. Instead give yourself 15 minutes to evaluate your situation, and ensure that you are truly hungry. Take the 15 minutes to decide if the hunger is emotionally driven or physically driven. Rather than unwrapping that candy bar out of emotional hunger, take a walk, treat yourself to a movie, listen to music, read or call a friend. If you think that stress is relating to a particular event and is pushing you towards the fridge, try talking to someone about it to distract yourself. In addition, it might help to plan daily activities for yourself. Not only will this help to steer you clear of emotional eating, but it will help you to enjoy some regular "you" time as well.

- ✓ Create healthy alternatives to eating. Whether it's a bubble bath or curling up with a good book, planning other activities will help you relax and avoid binge eating.

## 4. Do Not Keep Unhealthy Foods Around

Avoid having an abundance of high-calorie comfort foods in the house. Ensure your cupboards are stocked with healthy food choices. Make special days that you allow yourself to have "treat" foods available.

- ✓ If you are planning on heading to the grocery store but are feeling hungry or blue, postpone the shopping trip for a few hours so that these feelings don't influence your decisions at the store
- ✓ Plan your meals ahead of time! Knowing what you plan on eating ahead of time will make it less likely that you will opt for an unhealthy option, even after a stressful day.
- ✓ Keep healthy snacks such as vegetable sticks at work. Eating healthy snacks through the day will help to keep your blood sugar stabilized, keep your energy and mood up, and prevent cravings for sugary or fatty foods.





## 5. Snack Healthy & Eat a Balanced Diet

If you are not getting enough calories to meet your energy needs, you may be more likely to give into emotional eating. Try to eat at regular times and don't skip breakfast. Include foods from the basic food groups in your meals. Emphasize whole grains, vegetables and fruits, as well as low-fat dairy products and lean protein sources. When you fill up on the basics, you are more likely to feel full longer.

- 7:00am Breakfast: 2 eggs, 1 slice toast, natural peanut butter, yogurt (largest meal)
- 10:30am Snack: handful of nuts, 1 cup fruit, veggie snacks
- 12:00pm Lunch: whole grain tuna sandwich
- 3:00pm Snack: crackers and cheese/hummus
- 5:00pm Light snack: apple (once or twice a week, grant yourself a treat to satisfy your cravings)
- 6:30pm Dinner: 1 cup veggies, 1 cup whole grains, 5 oz lean meat, salad

✓ If you feel the urge to eat between meals, opt for healthy snacks such as fresh fruit, vegetables with fat-free dip, or unbuttered popcorn. Try out some low-fat, low calorie versions of your favourite foods to see if they satisfy your cravings. It is important to eat every 2-3 hours. Make specific times to eat, and prepare your meals and snacks ahead of time.

**Use the following table to make healthier substitutions for some of your favourite comfort foods.**

Instead of this...	Try This...
White pasta, white cheese sauce	Wild rice, spelt/whole grain pasta with fresh tomato sauce
Potato chips	Natural unbuttered popcorn
French fries/hash browns	Baked sweet potatoes
Ice cream	Natural yogurt, or fruit sorbet
Candy bars	Dark chocolate 70% cocoa
Doughnuts/ pastries	Whole grain bagel
Sugary cereal	Rolled oats with natural honey
Cheese burger	Salmon/lean turkey burger

## 6. Exercise & Get Adequate Rest

Your mood is more manageable and your body can more effectively fight stress when it is fit and well rested.

Participate in regular activity. Experts agree that physical activity is one of the most effective ways of reducing stress. You can also do relaxation exercises such as imagery and guided visualization, deep breathing and meditation. Try tai chi or yoga.

Get enough sleep. If you do not sleep well when you are stressed, it may have an impact on your weight loss efforts, and often will cause fatigue leading to emotional eating.

- ✓ Develop a ritual to help prepare yourself for sleep, and try going to bed at the same time each night. Deep breathing, yoga, and meditation are all great ways to ease emotional stress, and to help you fall asleep more easily.
- ✓ Be active every day. Go for a bike ride, do some pushups, check out the pool at your local healthy club. Every little bit counts!

## 7. Deal with your Stress

Since lack of emotional support is directly linked to the tendency to stress-eat, it is important that you build your own support network. This could mean joining a support group, talking with a counsellor, or starting a healthy weight loss program. It can be as simple as knowing which friend or family member you can turn to for support and motivation. By reaching out to others, you are getting the emotional support you crave.

- ✓ If you have difficulty expressing your emotions verbally, try getting them out on paper. Write a letter to someone else, or to yourself.
- ✓ Be sure to schedule time to spend with your peers. Developing relationships doesn't happen overnight, so make spending time with those you care about a priority.

## 8. Learn to Cope with Cravings

We all get food cravings and occasionally, we all give into them. Our response to food craving is often what will make or break our weight loss efforts. It is important to know how to handle these cravings. There are varying opinions on what causes food cravings: some experts say that the cause is physiological, and that our bodies crave certain nutrients when we want specific foods. In essence, we subconsciously desire food that might bring on a specific feeling like a sugar rush. Others believe cravings are a force of habit or a form of food addiction. Many of us crave foods that brought us pleasure growing up. These “comfort foods” may have more to do with emotional security than a desire for food.



Tip! The key to dealing with any food craving is to select times that you will give in to them. If you deny your cravings all the time, you will only drive yourself to binge and eat more of what you crave once you *do* indulge. Select a day or time that you will reward yourself for eating healthy.

Sources: [diabetescontrolforlife.com](http://diabetescontrolforlife.com), [weightloss.about.com](http://weightloss.about.com),  
Health Canada: [www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca)

## 9. Stay Involved

We often associate certain eating patterns with certain behaviours. More specifically, we find ourselves munching while participating in passive activities such as watching TV or surfing the internet. Be aware of your eating patterns during these activities, and try to limit the amount of time you spend in front of the TV and computer screen. Go for a walk, read a book, or do a word puzzle instead. This will help keep your mind and body active, and can help you to eliminate passive eating behaviours.

- ✓ If you find yourself coming home from work and heading for the couch with your favourite snack, try to prepare a healthier treat before hand – veggie sticks and dip are a great option!

## 10. Overall Wellness Approach

It is important to look at eating food for your health. Your body is so precious; you need to take care of it. Look at food as nutrients that fuel your body. Every vitamin, mineral or nutrient that you put into your body helps to maintain your youth, appearance, energy, and health. Once you start viewing food as a resource to health and vitality, your body will start to change. Combine your healthy nutrition with exercise and good spirit, and you're on your way to living happy and eating guilt free! Reward yourself occasionally with pleasure foods to celebrate your healthy eating efforts. Take a wellness approach in every aspect of your life – eat well, sleep well, exercise, and stay happy. Remember, it's okay to start small. Review the goals you have set throughout this document, and really make a commitment to live your best life!

