



How to Change your Emotional Eating Habits

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 overeating, but the blame can often be put on lack of self-awareness. You need to become aware of what drives you to overeat.

The Food & Mood Connection

It is important that you become aware of when you are using food as a way of distracting you from your feelings. If you are worried about upcoming events or issues in your life, 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 such as 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. 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.

Strategies to Help 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 may not be "truly" hungry. Give the cravings a few minutes to pass.

The chart to the right is a great tool when trying to determine if your hunger is stemming from physical need to eat, or emotional need to eat. Use the chart to understand the difference between emotional and physical hunger.

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

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



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.

✓ Try to always eat in the same spot. This will help increase your awareness about what you are eating and the process of your eating habits.

✓ 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?*”

✓ 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.

#2. Identify Your Emotional Triggers

Emotional eaters must become aware of their motivations for wanting to eat.

✓ 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 physically hungry. Take the 15 minutes to decide if the hunger is emotionally driven or physically driven.

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 from food, and to more healthily deal with the feelings you are experiencing. Alternatively, get active! Go for a walk, go for a swim, take your dog to the park...might help to plan daily activities for yourself.

#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, and only in very small amounts.

✓ 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 throughout 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.

✓ 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. 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, or check out the pool at your local health 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.



✓ If you have difficulty expressing your emotions verbally, try getting them out on paper. Write a letter to someone else, or even 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. 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 into 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. Be honest with yourself, and understand that having a treat does not mean having an entire day devoted to poor food choices.

#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.

✓ 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. 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!

Sources: diabetescontrolforlife.com, weightloss.about.com, Health Canada: www.hc-sc.gc.ca