

HOW TO CHANGE YOUR EMOTIONAL EATING HABITS

Introduction

Lots of 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 and unconsciously when they are facing a difficult problem or looking to keep themselves 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 the emotional triggers and signs, then learn to channel this energy into something productive. Most people blame themselves and their lack of willpower for over-eating, but the blame is due to lack of self-awareness. You need to become aware of what drives you to overeat.



The Connection Between the Food You Eat and Your Mood

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.

There are some foods that have addictive qualities. When your emotions are triggered you 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 hormones (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 bad eating habits. Some people automatically eat when they get home from work. Eating can be triggered out of the blue, the emotional eater all of a sudden feels like they are starving for food. The key is to recognize these feelings and associate them with their eating patterns and habits.

The worst part about emotional eating is it actually causes your problems to multiply. Instead of dealing with your emotions you are stuffing them down with food. You have added more issues to your problems such as weight gain, guilt about eating and poor health.



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.

Traits of Emotional Hunger

Emotional Hunger

Is sudden. One minute you're not even thinking about food, the next minute you're starving.

Is for a specific food like pasta, chocolate or a cheeseburger. You have trouble substituting the food for something else.

An emotional based craving starts in the mouth and mind. Your mouth wants to taste the food and your mind wanders through thoughts about your desired food.

Is urgent. Emotional hunger urges you to eat now. There is a desire to instantly ease emotional pain with food.

Is paired with an upsetting emotion. Your boss yelled at you. Your child is in trouble at school. Emotional hunger is in conjunction with stress or emotional situations.

Involves automatic or absent minded eating. You may not realize that you have eaten a whole bag of cookies.

You do not stop eating in response to fullness. Stems from a desire to cover up painful feelings. The person stuffs themselves to deaden their emotions and may eat so much that their stomach may start to hurt.

Feels guilty about eating. The paradox of emotional eating is that the person eats to feel better, and then berates themselves for eating.

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

Physical Hunger

Is gradual. Your stomach rumbles. One hour later, it begins to growl. You have progressive clues that you are hungry.

Is open to different foods. You may have food preferences, but they are flexible.

It is recognized from stomach sensations. You feel gnawing, rumbling, emptiness and even pain in your stomach with physical hunger.

Is patient. Physical hunger would prefer that you ate soon, but does not command you to eat right at that very instant.

Happens out of physical need. It occurs because it has been 4 or 5 hours since your last meal. You may have light headedness or low energy if you're extremely hungry.

Involves deliberate choices and awareness of the eating. You are aware of the food on your fork, in your mouth, and in your stomach. You can make the choice whether to eat half your sandwich or the whole thing.

Stops when full. Stems from a desire to fuel and nourish the body. As soon as that intention is fulfilled, the person stops eating.

Realizes eating is necessary. When the intent behind eating is based in physical hunger, there's no guilt or shame.



2. Identify Your Emotional Triggers

Emotional eaters must become aware of their motivations for wanting to eat. You need this awareness in order to tell whether your stomach's actually empty or you're just upset about something and want to eat to make you feel better. You need to analyze the feelings you have when you are hungry. The best way to do this 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 when you feel hunger pangs. Instead give yourself a 15 minute time out to make sure that you are truly hungry. Take the 15 minutes to decide if this is emotionally driven or true hunger. Rather than un-wrapping that candy bar, 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. It might help to plan daily activities for your-self. Create 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. If you feel hungry or blue, postpone the shopping trip for a few hours so that these feeling don't influence your decisions at the store. Make special days that you allow yourself to have these foods around.

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, choose a low-fat, low calorie food, such as fresh fruit, vegetables with fat-free dip or unbuttered popcorn. Or test low-fat, low calorie versions of your favorite foods to see if they satisfy your cravings. It is important to eat every 2-3 hours. Make specific times that you eat and prepare your meals and snacks so that they are healthy.

Here is an example of this meal plan

7:00 am Breakfast (2 eggs, 1 slice toast, natural peanut butter, yogurt) largest meal
10:30 Snack (handful of nuts, 1 cup fruit, veggie sticks)
12:00 pm Lunch (sandwich)
3:00-3:30 Snack (crackers and cheese/hummus)
5:00 Light snack (apple) or once or twice a week have a small cookie or treat to satisfy your cravings
Most people tend to snack on unhealthy foods when they get home from work.
6:30 pm dinner (1 cup veggies, 1 cup whole grains, 5 oz meat, small salad)

If you are eating this much food during these times of the day it should help you to cut out your unhealthy snacks.

6. Exercise Regularly & Get Adequate Rest

Your mood is more manageable and your body can more effectively fight stress when it's 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, that may have an impact on your weight loss efforts.

7. Deal with Your Stress

Since lack of emotional support is so 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, talk with a counselor or start 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.

8. Learn How to Cope With Your Cravings

We all get food cravings, we all give into them sometimes. Our response to food craving is what will make or break our weight loss efforts. It is important to know how to handle them.

There are varying opinions on what causes the food cravings. Some experts say that the cause is physiological, that our body is craving certain nutrients when we want specific foods or we are subconsciously desiring a result the food might bring (sugar rush). Others say cravings are a force of habit or a form of food addiction. Many of us crave foods that brought us pleasure growing up. These are known as comfort foods, which may have more to do with emotional security than a desire for food.

The key to deal with cravings is to select times to give in. 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 give in. Select a day or time that you will reward yourself for eating healthy.

9. 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 feed your body. Every vitamin, mineral or nutrients that you put into your body helps you maintain your youth, appearance, energy and health. Once you start viewing food as a resource to health and vitality in addition to eating healthy then your body will start to change. Nutrition combined with exercise and good spirit- you're on your way to living happy and eating guilt free. You can reward yourself with pleasure food for all the healthy efforts you have been putting forth all week. If you look at the overall wellness approach and make this lifestyle change you will immediately see the benefits.

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

