

Emotional Eating

Emotional eating refers to eating in response to feelings instead of physical hunger. Experts estimate that 75% of overeating is driven by emotions. And the foods we usually choose are "comfort" foods.

What's the connection between mood and food?



Major life events (such as unemployment, health problems and relationship problems) and daily life hassles (such as a stressful work commute, bad weather and changes in your normal routine) can trigger emotions that lead to overeating.

Depression, boredom, loneliness, chronic anger, anxiety, frustration, stress and poor self-esteem can result in overeating and unwanted weight gain.

Many of us learn that food can bring comfort, at least in the short-term. As a result, we often turn to food to heal emotional problems.

When you eat good tasting foods, such as chocolate, your body releases small amounts of hormones that can help you feel better.

Food can also be a distraction.

But the distraction is only temporary. While you're eating, your thoughts focus on the pleasant taste of your comfort food. Unfortunately, when you're done overeating, your attention returns to your worries, and you may now feel guilt about overeating.

Eating in response to emotions becomes a habit preventing us from learning skills that can help us better deal with our emotions.

By knowing what triggers our eating, we can use better ways to manage our emotional problems.

Eating Triggers

- Social
- Emotional
- Situational
- Thoughts
- Physiological

How can I identify eating triggers?

Situations and emotions that trigger us to eat fall into five main categories:

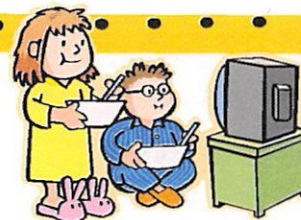
1. Social. Eating when around other people. For example, eating more when others encourage us to eat or we eat to fit in.

2. Emotional. Eating in response to boredom, stress, fatigue, tension, depression, anger, anxiety or loneliness as a way to "fill the void."



3. Situational. Eating because the opportunity is there. For example, at a restaurant, seeing an advertisement for a particular food or passing by a bakery. Eating may also go with certain activities such as watching TV, going to the movies or a sporting event, etc.

4. Thoughts. Eating because of feelings of negative self-worth or making excuses for eating. For example, scolding oneself for looks or a lack of will power.



5. Physiological. Eating in response to physical cues. For example, increased hunger due to skipping meals or eating to cure headaches or other pain.

To identify what triggers excessive eating in you, keep a food diary to record what and when you eat as well as what stressors, thoughts, or emotions you identify as you eat.

Emotional hunger vs physical hunger: How can I tell the difference?

1. Emotional hunger comes on suddenly; physical hunger occurs gradually.

2. When you are eating to fill a void that isn't related to an empty stomach, you crave a specific "comfort" food, such as pizza or ice cream, and only that food will seem appealing. When you eat because you are actually hungry, you're open to a variety of foods.

3. Emotional hunger feels like it needs to be satisfied instantly with the food you crave; physical hunger can wait.

4. Even when you are full, if you're eating to satisfy an emotional need, you're more likely to keep eating. When you're eating because you're hungry, you're more likely to stop when you're full.

5. Emotional eating triggers feelings of guilt and shame; eating when you are physically hungry does not.



Food gives us pleasure - that is part of the joy of eating! It is normal for food to comfort us. Let food be one way that you can comfort yourself without it being your default solution for dealing with emotions.

Steps To Manage Emotional Eating

1. Learn to recognize true hunger and when you are eating for reasons other than hunger.

Ask yourself "Am I hungry?"

If the answer is no, ask "Do I have the BLAHS"? (bored, lonely, angry/anxious, happy, sad).

Rank your hunger from 1-10 each time before you eat. This will help you determine if and when you are eating for reasons other than true hunger. You can use the following hunger scale:

Ravenous	Starving	Hungry	Pangs	Satisfied	Full	Very Full	Discomfort	Stuffed	Sick
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Waiting to eat when you are at a 1 (ravenous) or 2 (starving) can lead you to eat food very quickly and feel uncomfortable later on. Feed yourself in a reliable manner - plan your meals or snacks ahead of time!

2. Eat regular meals. Try to have 3 meals daily and add snacks in between meals as needed. More often than not, emotional eating is worsened by food restrictions (for example, when going on a diet). Aim to have balanced meals rather than restricting yourself. Making sure that you are eating regularly and feeling satisfied with your meals will make it easier for you to manage emotional eating.

3. Know your triggers. Pay attention to your emotions and thoughts. Notice if certain situations make you want to eat when you are not hungry. As you discover your own patterns, write them down in a diary or journal. Practice identifying your triggers without attaching judgment to them. Telling yourself that this is "bad" will only make you feel worse and want to eat more.

4. Learn techniques that can help you manage emotions. Relax, pay attention to your breath and to yourself. Acknowledge the craving that you are experiencing and tell yourself that it is alright to have cravings. Take a moment to know what you are feeling and what you want. After that, and if you wish to do so, you can choose to eat the food that you are craving. Do your best to eat in a way that is focused, deliberate, calm and without judgment. Learning how to deal with feelings is a skill that can be developed. If you tend to eat when you are bored, make a list of things to do and carry it with you or post it on the refrigerator. When you feel overwhelmed, take a break and do something else to clear your mind. For example, taking a walk, calling a friend, or even taking a nap can be great ways to relax and recharge yourself. See "101 Things To Do Besides Eat When You're NOT Hungry" for more ideas.

5. Practice, practice, practice. It takes time to build a new skill. Experiment with different strategies for different scenarios. Remember that cravings last about 10 to 20 minutes and will subside eventually. As you learn alternative strategies to help manage your emotions, do so knowing that you can have the food you are craving for anytime if you choose to do so.

6. Get adequate sleep. Your mood is more manageable and your body can fight stress better when it is well rested.



Helpful Websites:

Am I Hungry?: www.amihungry.com

Ellyn Satter Institute: www.ellynsatterinstitute.org

Intuitive Eating: www.intuitiveeating.org

The Center For Mindful Eating: www.tcme.org

Health At Every Size (HAES): www.lindabacon.org

What if distracting myself isn't enough ?

Sometimes simply distracting yourself from eating and developing alternative habits is not enough to manage the emotional distress that leads to excessive eating.

To cope more effectively with emotional stress, you might need to try:

- Relaxation exercises
- Meditation
- Individual or group counselling



If you continue to struggle with emotional eating, speak with your family doctor. Your doctor can refer you to a counsellor in his/her office.

Remember . . .

While it may seem that the core problem is that you're powerless over food, emotional eating actually stems from feeling powerless over your emotions. You don't feel capable of dealing with your feelings head on, so you avoid them with food.

Allowing yourself to feel uncomfortable emotions can be scary. You may fear that, like Pandora's box, once you open the door you won't be able to shut it. But the truth is that when we don't obsess over or suppress our emotions, even the most painful and difficult feelings subside relatively quickly and lose their power to control our attention. To do this you need to become mindful and learn how to stay connected to your moment-to-moment emotional experience. This can enable you to rein in stress and repair emotional problems that often trigger emotional eating.

Adapted from various sources:

Web MD Weight Loss Clinic Features: *Eating to feed a feeling, and not a growling stomach, is emotional eating; Emotional Eating* (reviewed by the Department of Nutrition Therapy at The Cleveland Clinic). SOURCES: Brian Wansink, PhD, consumer psychologist; marketing and nutritional science professor, director, Food and Brand Lab, University of Illinois. Jane Jakubczak, registered dietitian, University of Maryland. *American Demographics*, July 2000. *Physiology & Behavior*, 2003. University of Texas. Tufts University. Food and brand Lab, University of Illinois. Mayo Clinic Weight Loss. *Am I Hungry* by Michele May, MD. Secrets of feeding a healthy family by Ellyn Satter. www.helpguide.org