



HEALTH MATTERS!



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Emotional Eating

Are you an Emotional Eater? We don't always eat simply to satisfy hunger. We also turn to food for comfort, stress relief, or as a reward. The strongest food cravings often hit when you're at your weakest point emotionally. Unfortunately, emotional eating doesn't fix emotional problems - It usually makes you feel worse, as not only does the original emotional issue remain, but you also feel guilty for overeating. Learning to recognise the triggers of your emotional eating is the first step to breaking free from food cravings and compulsive overeating, and changing the habits that sabotage your diets.

Understanding Emotional Eating

If you've ever made room for dessert when you're already full, or dove into a tub of ice cream when you're feeling low, you've experienced emotional eating. Emotional eating is using food to make yourself feel better - eating to fill emotional needs, rather than to fill your stomach. Using food from time to time as a pick me up isn't necessarily a bad thing. But when eating is your primary emotional coping mechanism - when your first impulse is to open the refrigerator whenever you're upset, angry, lonely, stressed, exhausted, or bored - you can get stuck in an unhealthy cycle where the real feeling or problem is never addressed.

Emotional hunger can't be filled with food. Eating may feel good in the moment, but the feelings that triggered the eating are still there. You often can feel worse than before from weight gain from the unnecessary calories you consumed, and for not having more willpower. This can prevent you learning healthier ways to deal with your emotions, so you have a harder time controlling weight and mood - you feel increasingly powerless over food and your feelings.

- Do you eat more when you're feeling stressed?
- Do you eat when you're not hungry or when you're full?
- Do you eat to feel better (to calm and soothe yourself when you're sad, mad, bored, anxious, etc.)?
- Do you reward yourself with food?

The difference between emotional hunger and physical hunger

Emotional hunger

- Emotional hunger comes on suddenly.
- Emotional hunger feels like it needs to be satisfied instantly.
- Emotional hunger craves specific comfort foods.
- Emotional hunger isn't satisfied with a full stomach.
- Emotional eating triggers feelings of guilt, powerlessness, and shame.

Physical hunger

- Physical hunger comes on gradually.
- Physical hunger can wait.
- Physical hunger is open to options—lots of things sound good.
- Physical hunger stops when you're full.
- Eating to satisfy physical hunger doesn't make you feel bad about yourself.

Identify your Triggers

People eat for many different reasons. The first step in putting a stop to emotional eating is identifying your personal triggers. What situations, places, or feelings make you reach for the comfort of food? Keep in mind that while most emotional eating is linked to unpleasant feelings, it can also be triggered by positive emotions, such as rewarding yourself for achieving a goal or celebrating a holiday or happy event.

Common Causes of Emotional Eating

- **Stress** – leads to high levels of the stress hormone cortisol that triggers cravings for salty, sweet, and high-fat foods.
- **Dampening emotions** – like anger, fear, sadness, anxiety, loneliness and shame, by using food, so you can avoid the emotions you'd rather not feel.
- **Boredom or feelings of emptiness** – food fills you up and distracts you from underlying feelings of purposelessness and dissatisfaction with your life.
- **Childhood habits** – being rewarded for good behaviour, or your eating is driven by nostalgia for cherished memories.
- **Social influences** – being with friends can relieve stress, but can also lead to overeating, as it is easy to overindulge; out of nervousness, peer pressure, or simply because the food is there.

Tips to Help Stop Emotional Eating

When negative emotions threaten to trigger emotional eating, you can take steps to control cravings. To help stop emotional eating, try these tips:

- **Keep a food diary.** 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 might see patterns that reveal the connection between mood and food.
- **Tame your stress.** If stress contributes to your emotional eating, try a stress management technique, such as yoga, meditation or deep breathing.
- **Get support.** You're more likely to give in to emotional eating if you lack a good support network. Lean on family and friends or consider joining a support group.
- **Fight boredom.** Instead of snacking when you're not hungry, distract yourself and substitute a healthier behaviour. Take a walk, watch a movie, listen to music, read, surf the Internet, or call a friend.
- **Take away temptation.** Don't keep hard-to-resist comfort foods in your home. And if you feel angry or blue, postpone your trip to the supermarket until you have your emotions in check.
- **Don't deprive yourself.** If you are trying to lose weight, you might limit calories too much, eat the same foods repeatedly and banish treats. This may just serve to increase your food cravings, especially in response to emotions. Eat satisfying amounts of healthier foods, enjoy an occasional treat, and get plenty of variety to help curb cravings.
- **Snack healthy.** If you feel the urge to eat between meals, choose a low-fat, low-calorie snack, such as fresh fruit, vegetables with low-fat dip.

Foods to Focus On: Re-balance your moods with the following foods:

Carbohydrates – Always choose complex carbohydrates - i.e. whole grains that not only provide the brain with complex sugars for energy and essential nutrients, but crucially fibre that helps to slow the rate of glucose absorption. Choose: **wholegrains, green and starchy veg & pulses.**

Good fats – 60% of the fat in the brain is polyunsaturated, made from omega 3 fats (EPA & DHA). EPA appears to be the most potent natural anti-depressant and supports good mood. The best fats to consume are omega-3 oils from **oily fish, nuts, seeds & dark leafy greens.**

Protein – Protein is made from amino acids (AAs), the building blocks that are also used to form neurotransmitters like Serotonin (happy chemical) and others that are used to make Dopamine that keep us motivated and active. AAs can be found in: **Lean white meat, peanuts, beans, tofu, eggs, nuts (especially almonds), cheese (especially cottage), avocados, milk & bananas.**

Micronutrients – used for optimal brain function and to balance moods:

- **B-Vitamins** are found in the **hull of wholegrains, lean meats, mushrooms, avocados & leafy green vegetables.**
- **Zinc** is found in **eggs, mushrooms, seeds, nuts, as well as red meat & green leafy vegetables.**
- **Calcium** include: **milk, cheese & other dairy foods, green leafy vegetables, such as broccoli, cabbage and okra, (not spinach), soya beans, nuts and seeds.**
- **Vitamin D** is found in **sunshine, oily fish, mushrooms, dairy, tofu, or consider supplementing.**