



Emotional Eating

Emotional eating refers to eating in response to feelings instead of physical hunger. Experts estimate that 75% of overeating is caused by emotions. And the foods we usually choose are "comfort" or "not so healthy" 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.

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.

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

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

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.

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

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

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:

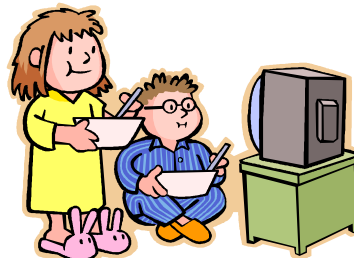
1. Social. Eating when around other people. For example, eating too much can happen when others encourage us to eat or we eat to fit in.

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.

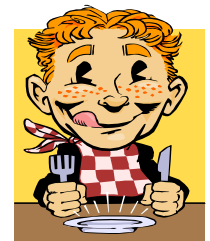
For example, at a restaurant, seeing an advertisement for a particular food, passing by a bakery. Eating may also go with certain activities such as watching TV, going to the movies or a sporting event, etc.

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 food, such as pizza or ice cream, and only that food will meet your need. 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 can give you feelings of guilt; eating when you are physically hungry does not.

When eating becomes the main strategy a person uses to manage emotions, then problems arise -- especially if the foods chosen aren't healthy options. If you eat when you are not hungry, chances are your body does not need the calories. The extra calories get stored as fat, and too much body fat can cause some health risks.

Steps To Managing Emotional Eating

1. Learn to recognize true hunger and when you are eating for non-physical reasons. Keeping a food record and ranking your hunger from 1-10 each time you put something in your mouth will help you determine if and when you are eating for reasons other than 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) can lead to overeating, past the point of satisfaction. Eating to the point of being at a 6 to 10 (full to sick) means that you weren't listening to your hunger cues and were likely eating for other reasons. The best time to eat is when you are at a 2 or 3 (starving or hungry). When you're hungry, food tastes good.

2. Know your triggers. Everyone is different. Usually, by the time you have identified a pattern, eating in response to emotions or certain situations has become a habit.

3. Learn techniques that help manage emotions besides eating so you can break that habit or "break the chain". Learning how to deal with feelings without food is a new skill many of us need to learn. Make a list of things to do when you get the urge to eat and you're not hungry, and carry it with you or post it on the refrigerator or cupboard door. When you feel overwhelmed, you can put off that desire by doing another enjoyable activity. Examples include: taking a walk, calling a friend, playing cards, cleaning your room, doing laundry, or something productive to take your mind off the craving -- even taking a nap. See Michele May's "101 Things To Do Besides Eat When You're NOT Hungry" for more ideas.

4. If you really want that comfort food, learn how to be in charge. The key is moderation, not elimination. Limit the amount of unhealthy foods in the house or control portions. For instance, if you have a large bag of chips, divide it into smaller containers or baggies and the temptation to eat more than one serving can be avoided. When it comes to comfort foods that aren't always healthy, like fattening desserts, remember the first few bites and the last few bites taste the best. Work on reducing your portion and you won't feel deprived.

5. Eat a balanced diet. If you're not getting enough calories to meet your energy needs, you may be more likely to give in to emotional eating. Try to eat at fairly regular times. Include foods from at least 3 of the 4 main food groups in your meals. Emphasize vegetables and fruits, whole grains as well as low-fat dairy products and lean protein sources. When you have balanced meals and snacks high in fibre, fluid and lean protein, you're more likely to feel fuller, longer.

6. Exercise regularly and get adequate rest. Your mood is more manageable and your body can fight stress better when it's fit and well rested.



Helpful Websites:

Am I Hungry?: www.amihungry.com

HUGS: www.hugs.com

Intuitive Eating: www.intuitiveeating.org

The Center For Mindful Eating: www.tcme.org

The Beck Diet Solution: www.beckdietsolution.com

What If distracting myself isn't enough to keep me from eating?

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

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

- Relaxation exercises
- Meditation
- Individual or group counselling



These techniques help to deal with emotional problems which may be causing you to overeat and teach you to cope in better ways. For more information on these, contact your doctor. He/she can refer you to the mental health counsellor in your doctor's office.

Remember . . .

If you give in to emotional eating, forgive yourself and start fresh at the next meal. Try to learn from the experience, and make a plan for how you can prevent it in the future. Focus on the positive changes you're making in your eating habits and give yourself credit for making changes towards better health.

As you learn to use better coping strategies and to reduce overeating, remember to reward yourself for a job well done. We tend to repeat behaviors that have been reinforced, so reward yourself when you meet your nutrition goals. Buy those clothes, take that vacation, or get that massage you wanted. By rewarding yourself for a job well done you increase the chance that you will maintain your new healthy habits.

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.



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101 Things to Do Besides Eat When You're NOT Hungry

When you recognize that an urge to eat was caused by a trigger rather than true hunger, you can choose to do another activity to distract yourself until the urge passes. Here is a list of 101 ideas to try instead of eating. Highlight those that appeal to you and add some of your own. Remember, try to choose activities that are enjoyable, available, and preferably, eating incompatible. Create a "Distraction Box" or drawer with everything you need to distract yourself and establish a Food Free Zone in a comfortable area in your home or office that is perfect for just for these moments.

Imagine a slimmer, healthier you * Walk around the block * Call a friend * Make a list of your Top Ten Reasons to Lose Weight * Read a child a book * Make a To Do list * Dance a little * Plan a vacation * Get a massage * Jot a thank you note to someone * Go to bed early * Read a great book * Write in your Awareness Journal * Give yourself a manicure or pedicure * Plan a healthy meal for your family * Surf the Internet * Finish an unfinished project * Walk your dog * Feel your feelings * Volunteer in your community * Start a hobby * Brush your teeth * Tape your favorite show to watch while exercising * Take 5 slow, deep cleansing breaths * Practice an instrument * Balance your checkbook * Plan a party * Say a prayer * Buy yourself some flowers * Do a few sit-ups * Make a phone call to someone you like * Chop veggies to keep on hand * Set your priorities * Try a new hairstyle * Give a massage * Write down something you are proud of this week * Clean out a junk drawer * Play a game with your kids * Try a new route on your walk * Scream! * Plant fresh herbs to use in your cooking * Drink a glass of water * Kiss someone * Try on some of your clothes * Catch up on your reading for work * Look at old pictures * Rent a video * Smell the roses * Wash your car * Chew some gum * Plan a "date" for someone special * Swim a few laps * Read Am I Hungry * Take a hot, soothing bath * Update your calendar * Get it off your chest * Build something * Check in on an elderly person * Work in your yard * Start your holiday shopping list * Count your blessings * Write a letter * Fold some laundry * Listen to your inner conversations * Take a nap * Run an errand * Work on your budget * Take a bike ride * Check your e-mail * Make a positive statement about yourself - repeat often * Give your dog a bath * Start a project you've been wanting to get around to * Send a birthday card * Meditate * Try a healthy new recipe * Play cards * Set your goals * Freshen your make-up * Hug someone * Rearrange some furniture * Go take a hike! * Help with homework * Light a fire or some candles * Say "STOP!" out loud * Put your pictures in an album * Walk around your workplace * Try a new relaxation technique * Talk it over with someone * Get a head start on your taxes * S-t-r-e-t-c-h * Do a "Honey Do" * Say what's on your mind * Go pick up your mail * Straighten a closet * Think * Do something nice for someone anonymously * Check the stock market * Plan a romantic encounter * Clean out a files * Tell someone how you really feel * When you become truly physically hungry, eat!