

Emotional Eating: Breaking the Cycle

Most American adults have a relationship or have had experiences with emotional eating. Although no singular definition of emotional eating exists, emotional eating is explained as eating in response to feelings rather than hunger. Emotional eating typically is linked to stress, depression, anxiety, or frustration. Many people also report eating in response to happy feelings, but eating in response to happy feelings and events generally is not categorized as emotional eating. The major issue with emotional eating is that people tend to overeat, consume too many calories, and choose foods that are nutrient poor. It seems that part of emotional eating incorporates salty, fatty, and sweet foods, which of course can lead to becoming overweight.

One hypothesis is that some foods have addictive qualities and cause a release of hormones that promote a feeling of well-being and satisfaction. The pleasure of eating replaces some of the generally negative feelings. Because most people have relationships with foods that bring them pleasure, they will seek out these foods in an emotional moment. This relationship becomes a habit, and the cycle is hard to break.

Another theory is that food is a great distraction from worries, stress, or negative feelings. While eating, individuals do not think of the things that cause them to overeat. However, this distraction is temporary, and often people wind up in the same state that brought them to use food for coping, with the added guilt of overeating and worries about weight management and health.

Emotional eating triggers

One philosophy recommends identifying your emotional eating triggers, which are categorized as social, emotional, situational, thoughts, and physiological.

- **Social**—eating when around other people. For example, excessive eating can result from:
 - Others encouraging you to eat
 - Eating to fit in
 - Arguing
 - Feelings of inadequacy around other people
- **Emotional**—eating in response to:
 - Boredom
 - Stress
 - Fatigue
 - Tension
 - Depression
 - Anger
 - Anxiety
 - Loneliness as a way to "fill the void"
- **Situational**—eating because the opportunity is there, such as:
 - Going to a restaurant
 - Seeing an advertisement for a particular food
 - Passing by a bakery
 - Watching television
 - Going to the movies, a sporting event, or other special activities

- **Thoughts**—eating because of negative self-worth or making excuses for eating, such as scolding oneself for:
 - Appearance
 - Lack of will power
- **Physiological**—eating in response to physical cues, such as:
 - Increased hunger because of skipped meals
 - Eating to cure headaches or other pain

Identifying emotional eating triggers is extremely important in identifying how and why extra calories are consumed. The next step is to come up with a plan to break the cycle and adopt new coping mechanisms. Try these suggestions:

- Take a walk
- Talk with a friend
- Write down your feelings or start a journal
- Drink a glass of water or tea
- Play a game
- Listen to music
- Find a pleasurable activity to do until the urge to eat passes

Counseling, relaxation exercises, yoga, and medication also are helpful for breaking the emotional eating cycle and may promote new coping mechanisms.

References

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