

Emotional Eating and Food Addiction

The Power of Food

Food has the power to nourish your body, mind and spirit. It can fuel your body to be healthy and strong, bring joy to celebrations and provide an opportunity to share cultural traditions. Healthful foods in proper portions will leave you feeling satisfied and “just the right” amount of full.

But food, when used to suppress or soothe emotions, can lead to unhealthy patterns of eating. **Emotional eating** is responding to triggers (events or situations) with eating large amounts of food. Common triggers include:

- relationship conflicts
- work stress
- financial stress
- feeling overwhelmed
- health problems
- being extremely tired (fatigued)
- being unable to sleep (insomnia)
- finishing a difficult task or getting through a stressful time (food as a reward).

It is OK to indulge or celebrate with food every once in a while. However, if you start using food to cope with the highs and lows of life, you can begin to rely on food to manage your emotions (as a “drug”).

Food as a Drug

Food can be misused as a “drug” to numb or dull emotions. Eating pleasurable foods (high in fat, sugar or salt) can cause your brain to produce feel-good chemicals, making you feel better for a short time. However, feelings of shame, guilt and regret often set in after the food is gone. This can leave you feeling worse than you did before the emotional eating episode.

Emotional Eating and Food Addiction

Over time, emotional eating can lead to food addiction. Signs and symptoms of food addiction may include:

- using food to feel better
- using food as a “reward”
- being unable to manage or decrease the amount of food you eat
- eating large amounts of food despite negative consequences (weight gain, bloating, pain)
- losing control of your eating habits (may or may not include bingeing, purging or both)
- choosing food over activities that once brought you joy
- feeling shame, guilt or regret after eating.

Not everyone has the same signs and symptoms. You may only have one, several or all of the above.

Treatment

Emotional eating and food addiction can be treated. It is important to learn coping skills to replace emotional eating, and to relearn how to have a healthy relationship with food. The following tips can help.

■ Create a meal structure.

Plan meals and snacks for specific times throughout the day (for example, breakfast, morning snack, lunch, afternoon snack, dinner). This can help decrease “grazing” (constant snacking), prevent saving your calories for a binge and help you become more mindful of when you are hungry.

■ Keep tempting foods out.

The easiest way to avoid eating unhealthy foods is to keep them out of your home. If you are tempted by ice cream, go to a special ice cream shop to enjoy a small portion instead of digging into a carton from your freezer. You may find you are less likely to leave the house and more likely to choose a healthful snack from home instead.

■ Bring healthful foods in.

A well-stocked kitchen is key to success! Replace food high in fat, sugar or salt with healthful foods such as whole grains, fish and lean meats, eggs, low-fat or fat-free dairy products (yogurt, milk), healthful fats (nuts, avocado), and plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables.

■ Rate your hunger.

How hungry are you on a scale of 1 to 5?

- 1 = stuffed
- 2 = satisfied (“just right”)
- 3 = hungry
- 4 = very hungry
- 5 = extremely hungry

Eat when you are at a 3 or 4 and stop when you are at a 2.

■ Practice mindful eating.

Get rid of distractions such as TV and social media when you eat. Sit down. Focus on your food. Notice how it tastes as you chew each bite. This will likely help you enjoy your food more and may help you eat less by allowing you to notice when you feel full.

■ Identify your triggers.

You may not be able to avoid all triggers (deadline at work, unexpected bill). Avoid the triggers you can and practice positive ways of coping with the others. For example, you can go to bed earlier to prevent being overtired. Getting enough rest may also improve your attitude and the way you communicate with others, and help you to be more productive.

■ Do a favorite hobby or activity to distract you from your desire to overeat.

You can try painting your nails, reading, drawing, doing puzzles or word games, or exercising to keep your mind off of food. These activities can also help to reduce stress.

■ Eat with others.

Regularly eating with others who eat healthful foods can help you stick to your own goals for better health. This also gives you the opportunity to talk through any problems you are having. Together, you can create healthy habits and support each other along the way.

Whom to Call With Questions

Talk with your health care provider or dietitian if you have questions.