

# Emotional Eating

Food is more than just a source of nutrients. Food is part of culture, celebration, connection, and enjoyment. Enjoying a variety of foods is all part of a balanced lifestyle. However, many people turn to food for comfort — consciously or unconsciously — when they're facing a difficult problem or looking to keep themselves occupied. Emotional eating can lead to eating more food than your body needs, especially highly processed foods that contain excess sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats. The good news is that if you're prone to emotional eating, you can take steps to become more in tuned to what your body actually needs, by paying attention to your hunger levels and emotions.

## The Connection Between Mood and Food

Major life events and daily life hassles can trigger emotions that lead to overeating. But why do negative emotions lead to overeating? Some foods may have addictive qualities. For example, when you eat palatable foods, such as chocolate, your body releases trace amounts of mood- and satisfaction-elevating chemicals. That "reward" may reinforce a preference for foods that are most closely associated with specific feelings. We all have foods that provide us comfort, which are often linked to positive experiences from our past. Food can also be a distraction. Eating can become a way that we avoid dealing with

difficult situations and feelings. If you're worried about an upcoming event or thinking about an earlier conflict, eating comfort foods may “numb” your feelings. However, food is only a temporary distraction. After you are finished eating, the feelings and worries often return.



## How to Practice Listening to your Body

Strong emotions can trigger cravings for food. To help manage emotional eating, try these suggestions:

When a craving strikes, ask yourself this question:

Am I truly hungry?

- If **yes**, honor your hunger and choose a balanced snack. Try to sit at the kitchen table with no distractions so you can really enjoy your food.
- If **no**, ask yourself
  - How am I really feeling right now? Name what you are feeling, such as bored, worried, lonely, sad, or anxious.

- How can I better cope with how I am feeling? Perhaps you could call a friend, go for a walk, listen to music, or read instead.

effectively fight stress when it's active and well rested.

If you do emotionally eat, forgive yourself and start fresh at your next meal. Being compassionate towards yourself can make moving past setbacks much easier. Focus on the positive changes that you are making in your eating habits and give yourself credit for taking the time to practice nourishing self-care.

Adapted from 'Mayo Clinic Healthy Weight for EveryBody'

## What Can You Do?

- 1- **Know your triggers.** For the next several days, 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 may see patterns emerge that reveal triggers for emotional eating. If some of your triggers are unavoidable, try coming up with a few alternative strategies other than eating.
- 2- **Limit the amount of unhealthy food options in your home.** You may find it easier to ride out a craving for a favourite comfort food if it is not available in your home.
- 3- **Eat healthy snacks and choose balanced meals.** Nourish your body with quality foods such as fruits, vegetables, nuts, whole grains, lower fat dairy products, and lean sources of meat. You may experience more cravings if your body is not getting the nutrients it requires for good health.
- 4- **Exercise regularly and get adequate rest.** Your mood is more manageable and your body can more



Last Updated August 2020