



Emotional Eating

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NORTHSTAR COMPASS

*Navigating
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Emotional
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WHAT IS EMOTIONAL EATING?

Emotional eating is eating unnecessarily to satisfy physical hunger or nutritional needs. For the emotional eater, food is often used to help deal with primarily painful emotion, but sometimes positive emotions as well.

This tendency often starts in childhood as parents unknowingly give the message that little pains and disappointments in life can be soothed away with food. A skinned knee is treated with a band-aid, kiss, and a cookie. A horrible day at school is forgotten when a steaming hot deep dish pizza appears on the table. Sweet treats become rewards. Sometimes love is expressed through food, particularly in certain cultures. As we grow older, the association of food with positive emotion, such as comfort, feeling cared for, or loved, continues. Certain foods bring satisfaction and pleasure, much like a warm blanket on a cold winter night.

Food can be used as an expression of love, or a substitute for it. Some people turn to food when they do not get the love and affection they need, using it to try and fill an emotional hunger.

To some extent, we are all emotional eaters. When we are dealt a cruel blow, it is easy to reach for a comforting food to make things right.

PHYSICAL ASPECTS OF EMOTIONAL EATING

Emotional eating is not without a physical basis. Most people don't binge on healthy foods. They crave dense, simple carbohydrates, refined sugars, fat-laden delicacies, and salty foods. These unhealthy and calorie-loaded tempting treats are the comfort food of choice. Sugar makes people feel good.

THE WAY IT WORKS

Our bodies release a chemical called dopamine (a complex chemical that regulates the body's reward system) when we perceive something good has happened. According to biochemist Christie Wilcox, when we grow up with sweet treats used as rewards or the expression of love, the brain begins to associate sweet treats with positive emotions and releases dopamine when

we eat them. We crave them because the dopamine they release really does make us feel better.

Serotonin, another important chemical in our bodies, is important to food cravings and overeating. Serotonin levels help regulate our mood and overall sense of well-being. When levels are low we are depressed, and when they are high, we are happy and upbeat. The production of serotonin in the brain is boosted by certain amino acids, found primarily in carbohydrates. When we feel down or low, our bodies crave carbohydrate-dense foods to gain an emotional boost (nutritionwonderland.com, 2018).

BRINGING BALANCE

This cycle may continue until you choose another way to deal with your emotions and find alternative ways to stay healthy and chemically balanced.



EMOTIONAL EATERS OFTEN EAT TO DEAL WITH NEGATIVE EMOTION:

- Anger
- Sadness
- Depression
- Boredom
- Emptiness
- Grief and loss
- Loneliness
- Exhaustion
- Frustration
- Rejection
- Heartbreak
- Stress
- Loss or lack of control
- Relationship Issues

OR MAINTAIN POSITIVE EMOTION:

- Euphoria
- Celebration
- Love
- Joy
- Contentment
- Satisfaction
- Affirmation
- Reward Productivity

MANAGING EMOTIONAL EATING

Tune in to your body. Ask yourself, “What am I feeling? Is this hunger or some other need?”

Write it down. Keep track of when and what you eat, how you were feeling, and how hungry you were when you ate.

Find your triggers. Determine which emotions prompt your eating and find positive ways to release, satisfy, or gain those emotions. If necessary, find counseling help.

De-stress. Learn some relaxation techniques and exercises. When you have an urge to eat without being truly hungry, practice relaxation.

Positive self-talk. Don't beat yourself up. Rather than reciting your faults and failures, change your thinking patterns and focus on the good and positive traits about yourself.

Exercise. Good, old-fashioned exercise is a great way to release the feel-good chemicals in your body.

Sleep. Adequate sleep is important to health in general, but is also an

important key to maintain high serotonin levels in the brain.

Distract yourself. Stay busy with enjoyable activities to keep your mind active and off food.

Eat only during certain times and in a specific place. Don't eat while you're doing something else like watching television or reading as this turns mindful living into mindless eating.

Be aware of all-or-nothing thinking. You can decide to have a small portion of a high-calorie food. Choosing a bite-size candy bar doesn't mean you are doomed to eat the whole bag.

Plan delicious, nutritious meals. Keep a regular eating schedule, take time to sit down, and enjoy your meal.

Encourage yourself in right attitudes. Guilt is a negative, non-productive emotion. Instead, decide to deal with the underlying emotion and chose to be accountable in following through with your plan to change your eating habits. Rather than condemn yourself, encourage and praise yourself for right attitudes and positive actions.

IDENTIFYING EMOTIONAL EATING

Here are a few signals to help you identify emotional eating:

- Eating larger than normal portions
- Eating at unusual times
- Loss of control
- Strong emotion
- Eating to the point of discomfort
- Eating alone, in secret

PHYSICAL HUNGER		EMOTIONAL HUNGER
Gradual onset	↔	Sudden and urgent onset
Many foods can satisfy	↔	Only a specific food can satisfy
You stop eating when you are full	↔	You eat more than needed, often to the point of being uncomfortable
No guilt	↔	Often feel guilty after eating

SOURCE:

<http://nutritionwonderland.com/2009/06/understanding-bodies-serotonin-connection-between-food-and-mood/>. Accessed April 2018.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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He received his Master's Degree from Wheaton Graduate School, his Doctorate of Psychology (PsyD) from the Illinois School of Professional Psychology, and his Certificate in Co-Occurring Disorders from Adler Graduate School. He serves frequently as a seminar leader, and has taught workshops in the USA, Canada, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and India.

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This information in this publication is not intended as a substitute for professional help or to be used as a diagnostic tool. If you have serious difficulties with anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues, please seek professional help.