

EMOTIONAL EATING - FIXING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD

What is emotional eating?

We don't always eat just to satisfy physical hunger. We also turn to food for comfort, stress relief, when we are tired, or to reward ourselves. On those occasions we tend to reach for high sugar, high fat, and other unhealthy foods. We might reach for a pint of ice cream when feeling down, order a pizza if you're bored or lonely, or go to a drive-through after a stressful day at work.

Emotional eating is using food to make yourself feel better—to fill emotional needs, rather than your stomach. Unfortunately, emotional eating doesn't fix emotional problems. In fact, it usually makes you feel worse. Afterward, not only does the original emotional issue remain, but you also feel guilty for overeating.

Food can be used to cope with feelings in many ways. Using food to deal with emotions is satisfying your emotional hunger and not your biological (physical) hunger. Emotional eating is triggered by feelings, such as boredom, stress, sadness or anger and not by physical hunger. From a very young age you start to develop emotional associations with food. It starts from the day you are born and are offered breast or bottle milk to feed you and stop you from crying. It continues when you are offered sweets to soothe a fall and a scraped knee. It gets further reinforced with celebrations such as birthdays, communions and weddings and so on.

We associate food with comfort, celebration, love and friendships. Sometimes food is the only friend to soothe pain and loneliness.

Anger, boredom, sadness, stress and loneliness are emotions you experience throughout your life. Each emotion has its own trigger, but food won't fix any of these feelings. You may be able comfort and distract from the emotion for a short time, but food won't solve your problems. If anything, eating to silence your emotional hunger will only make you feel worse in the long run. In order to overcome emotional eating, you will have to deal with the source of the emotion. Often it is difficult to identify the emotions and the reason for overeating.

When eating is your primary emotional coping mechanism—when your first impulse is to open the refrigerator whenever you're stressed, upset, angry, lonely, exhausted, or bored—you get stuck in an unhealthy cycle where the real feeling or problem is never addressed.

Emotional eating tends to be automatic and virtually mindless. Before you even realise what you're doing, you've eaten more than you intended.

Eating may feel satisfying in the moment, but the comfort you get from food is short lived and the the feelings that triggered the eating are still there. Often you may feel worse afterwards as you feel guilty, ashamed, frustrated, hopeless. You beat yourself up for not having more willpower.

The good news is that you can learn healthier ways to deal with your emotions, avoid triggers, conquer cravings, and finally put a stop to emotional eating.

Once you tune in to what emotion drives you to overeat you may find, in the short term, the emotions may intensify as you are letting yourself experience your emotions.

Learning to overcome emotional eating

- 1) Are you experiencing physical hunger or is it emotional hunger?
- 2) If it is physical hunger then eat
- 3) If it is emotional hunger identify your emotion. Is it boredom, stress, anger or are you hurt or sad?
- 4) Identify your emotion in your body. Every emotion manifests in your body. It could be racing heart, tightness in your chest, a headache, tightness in shoulders etc.
- 5) Take 5 minutes and let yourself feel the emotion
- 6) Ask yourself what do you need right now? Is food going to solve your problem?
The answer is no. Food does not resolve uncomfortable emotions.
- 7) Have a plan in place with activities you can do the next time you experience a certain emotion
- 8) Keep an emotional eating diary to discover when you are most at risk

Emotional Eating can be divided into 5 categories:

- 1) Sensory Gratification - that is eating for joy. It is pleasing your palate and letting you appreciate food that you enjoy. By letting yourself enjoy food, you will actually reduce the amount of food you consume. Using Mindful Eating will help you appreciate and enjoy your food more and therefore help you eat less.
- 2) Comfort eating - Thinking back to your childhood and foods you loved and bring back fond memories. it could be having a cup of cocoa with family in front of the fire, or chicken soup when you were sick. Eating comfort foods occasionally actually is necessary to develop a healthy relationship with food, as long as you stay in touch with your physical hunger signals and where you are at the hunger scale.
- 3) Distraction - Using food for distraction is problematic as you won't be able to identify feelings you are trying to avoid. Food is not an appropriate medium to distract you from feelings, and you will need to learn other coping mechanisms for dealing with string emotions.
- 4) Sedation - This is a more serious form of using food to distract from feelings. It will numb you over extended periods of time from your emotions and you will become unable to distinguish between emotional and physical hunger. Most people using food for sedation feel out of control and experience shame and guilt. This type of eating can lead to addictive behaviour with food.
- 5) Punishment - This is the most severe form of emotional eating and leads to eating large amounts of food in an angry forceful manner. There is no pleasure in eating and sometimes hate can be experienced towards food.

