

How to control **emotional** eating and lose weight

The food and mood connection

In today's world, events such as losing your job, health problems, divorce, work stress, bad weather and many other incidents can trigger negative emotions. But why do negative emotions lead to overeating?

Eating can be an effective way to lift your moods quickly. For most people, food is a natural anti-anxiety medication. Food reduces fear and helps you tolerate moderate feelings of anxiety. Food may also make you feel better when you are down. Once you learn that food is an effective way to alter your emotions, you are likely to use this strategy more often. Over time, the association between eating and feeling better becomes stronger. When you feel bad, you know that eating will make you feel better, at least for a short period. Thus, you experience intense desires to eat that are similar in many ways to the cravings of addiction. It is extremely hard not to eat when you know that eating will make you feel better right away. Once you start eating, it is hard to stop until the food has masked your feelings. When you eat a moderate amount and you don't feel better, it's very tempting to think that a little more might fix it. Therefore, emotional eating often turns into overeating, and excessive emotional eating is the most common reason people gain weight or fail to lose weight.

Food also serves as a distraction. If you're worried about an upcoming event or rethinking an earlier conflict, eating comfort foods may distract you. But the distraction is only temporary. While you're eating, your thoughts focus on the pleasant taste of your comfort food. Unfortunately, when you're done overeating, your attention returns to your worries, and you may now bear the additional guilt about overeating.

Regaining control of your eating behaviours

Although strong emotions can trigger cravings for food, you can take steps to control those cravings. To help reduce emotional eating, try these suggestions:

- **Learn to recognise true appetite.** Is your hunger physical or emotional? If you ate just a few hours ago and don't have a rumbling stomach, you're probably not really hungry. Try and monitor your appetite and give the cravings a few minutes to pass.



- **Don't let yourself get too hungry.** If you're not eating enough to meet your energy needs, you may be more likely to give in to emotional eating. Try to eat at fairly regular times and aim for moderate fullness.
- **Look elsewhere for comfort.** Instead of eating a chocolate bar, take a walk, treat yourself to a movie, listen to music, read a book, or call a friend.
- **Don't keep unhealthy foods around.** Avoid having an abundance of high-energy comfort foods in the house. Replace them with low GI options like whole grains, vegetables and fruits, as well as low-fat dairy products and lean protein sources. When you fill up on the healthy options, you're more likely to feel fuller, longer.
- **Exercise regularly and get adequate rest.** Your mood is more manageable and your body can more effectively fight stress when it's fit and well rested.

If you give in to emotional eating, forgive yourself and start fresh the next day. Try to learn from the experience, and make a plan for how you can prevent it in the future. Focus on the positive changes you're making in your eating habits and give yourself credit for making changes that ensure better health.

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