

Emotional Eating

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<http://sensible-alternative.com.au/diet-and-weight-loss/emotional-eating>

Does an awkward phone call make you hungry?

Do you stick with your diet all day, only to eat junk after a fight with your husband?

When we eat to feel better emotionally, weight loss can be a long, difficult road.

Standard dietary advice is of very little use to emotional eaters, because they already know that junk food is unhealthy. They know, but when they feel bad emotionally, they do not care. Emotions do not respond to logical diet advice, or to points, or to counting carbs. Emotions respond to comfort, and that is something that junk food can definitely deliver. Sweet, starchy food stimulates the release of opiate-type chemicals in the brain. In this way, sweet food is like a drug. Unfortunately, biscuit-induced comfort is very short-lived, lasting for only 10 or 15 minutes. A reactive drop in mood then follows, and the withdrawal misery is made worse by the guilt of having had junk-food.

I have worked with weight loss for twenty years, and I have seen first-hand how much emotional eaters struggle. Binge-eating and emotional eating are not caused by a lack of will-power. Instead, they are caused by an unconscious reaction to emotion. Emotional eaters use food to avoid uncomfortable emotions, because, for many, it was what they learned during childhood. If, as a child, you were given food to stop crying, then, as an adult, food is what you will continue to use, until you put a stop to it.

Warning signs of emotional eating.

- Sudden onset of hunger after a distressing or uncomfortable event
- Unconscious eating (finishing the tray of biscuits without noticing)
- Increased hunger after eating, rather than satiety
- Attempt to hide the eating from family and friends
- Guilt after eating
- Downward spiral of eating more food as a self-punishment for having eaten some food

How to break the cycle of emotional eating

Witness your emotion

The way out of emotional eating is to change the pattern of unconscious thought. One technique is the use of inner witness.

When you feel bad, and want to eat, don't immediately judge it as bad. Instead, just watch it with curiosity, as if you were a scientist. Recognise it for what it is: an emotion. The emotion may not immediately go away, but it can be experienced more truthfully. Over time, the mind will shift from unconscious mode to conscious mode, and in conscious mode, we want to be healthy, and we do not want junk-food.

Comfort yourself in other ways

What do you do with a bad emotion? Provide yourself with comfort. Comfort should not be food, but it should be something self-indulgent. My fall-back comfort is a Jane Austen movie, or a hot bath. Other options are a back-rub from a spouse, or from a massage therapist. A computer game. A long phone conversation with a friend. A nap. A cup of hot tea. Dancing around the room to your favourite song. A relaxing yoga pose such as 'legs up the wall'.

Make a list of your pleasures and comforts. Pull one out when you are in a bad moment, and need something soft and nice and just for you. You do not even have to wait for a bad emotion: Schedule regular time for relaxation and fun.

Prevent the downward spiral of guilt

Guilt is not a good motivator for emotional eaters. Because it is a negative emotion, guilt can actually make the situation worse. When an emotional eater has eaten something bad and feels guilty, the despair may prompt her to eat even more junk-food.

The solution is to recognise that none of us are perfect beings. Sometimes we will have a biscuit. Assess the situation consciously: "Would you severely criticise a friend for allowing herself one sweet treat? Why should you treat yourself any differently that you treat a friend?"

Once you have made the decision to have a biscuit, then you might as well get some joy out of it. This is not to say that you should have sweet treats, but if you do occasionally eat them, then it is much healthier to eat them without guilt. Avoiding guilt is a way to stay in control, and to stick with a healthy diet for the rest of the day.

Rethink the pleasure that food gives

To make the choice to forgo food as emotional comfort, does not mean that we must forgo the pleasure that food gives. Far beyond the short-lived opiate-type rush of junk food, healthy food has a lot to offer.

Pleasure comes from the satisfaction of real hunger with food, and that pleasure is very different than the filling an emotional void with sweets. Learn to recognise what true hunger and what true satisfaction feel like. Observe your body after a busy morning, when you did not have a chance to snack. Your stomach is grumbling. Observe how good it feels to eat a warm nourishing meal when you are in this state. Your empty stomach has been filled. There is no guilt. There is contentment.

Pleasure comes from knowing that food is healthy and energy-giving. Enjoy such thoughts as "This chicken is building my muscles and making me stronger." "This healthy fat is supporting my nervous system and making me calm." "These vegetables are better for my complexion than any expensive face-cream."

Pleasure comes from the taste of healthy food. What tastes better? Tim tams, or succulent lamb? What could be nicer than avocado, goat cheese or smoked salmon? When you are physically hungry, get maximum enjoyment from healthy starches such as root vegetables and rice. Add a bit of salt, and butter and herbs. The taste sensation from this kind of food is not the quick fix of junk food. It is slower, but long-lasting.

Break the cycle. Commit to four weeks without sugary food of any kind

Avoid cakes and biscuits and soft drinks. Avoid hidden sugars in supposed healthy foods such as flavoured yoghurt, muesli bars, breakfast cereals and smoothies. Four weeks may seem like a long time, but it takes that long to wean off sugar. During the four weeks, tame sugar cravings by eating regular protein and supplementing B-vitamins. At the end of the four weeks, sugar will not seem the necessity that you thought it was

Sugar is not a food group. We regard sweet foods as part of a normal diet, but that is wrong. With our modern diet, we eat as many refined carbohydrates in one week as our 19th century ancestors ate in an entire year.

It does not matter that co-workers and family and friends are having sweets every day. It is not something that we should do. Sweets cause weight gain,

hormone problems, and an increased rate of ageing. For an emotional eater, sweets will always create a craving for more sweets.

Save yourself for sweets worth having. Is your health really worth the cheap, commercial-variety sweet biscuits and yoghurts that you have every day? Respect your body, and respect sweet things too, by saving yourself for sweets that are really nice. If your Mum has made her famous chocolate cake for your birthday, you will enjoy it more if it is the first sweet thing that you have had in two months.

What about chocolate?

If you need something sweet to finish a meal, choose dark chocolate. Chocolate that is at least 70% cocoa is high in anti-oxidants and is an appetite suppressant. It is also so satisfying that most people can stop after 1 or 2 squares. Dark chocolate has less sugar than standard milk chocolate, so it will not cause weight gain. It is also high in magnesium, which calms the nervous system, and is especially helpful during premenstrual tension. That is why taking magnesium supplements may eliminate a chocolate craving. If you cannot restrict yourself to dark chocolate, or you cannot stop after 2 squares of dark chocolate, then you have to avoid it.

Identify food sensitivities

In some people, wheat gluten and casein from [cow's milk](#) convert to opiate-type substances in the body, and cause over-eating. Determine if your over-eating is a symptom of food sensitivity. Completely avoid wheat and cow's milk for four weeks. You may find that your constant hunger disappears.

Get enough sleep

[Sleep](#) is a good way to prevent emotional eating. When we have slept well, we have a greater tolerance to stress, and more consistent energy. Chronic sleep-deprivation, on the other hand, makes us eat more because it disrupts leptin, which is an appetite-suppressing hormone. Eight hours of sleep are necessary for the release of leptin, and other important weight loss hormones such as growth hormone.

Do yoga

A regular yoga practice assists with weight loss because it cultivates mindful eating. In a study of 300 people over 10 years, those who did yoga for more than one hour per week had a significantly lower body mass index than those who did not, independent of total physical activity and diet. The success of yoga was attributed to its correlation with mindful eating, which is

the ability to eat only when hungry, and to stop eating when full. The benefit on mindful eating was unique to yoga, and was not observed for other forms of exercise such as walking or running. Yoga trains the mind to observe discomfort in a calm, accepting way. "This ability to be calm and observant during physical discomfort teaches how to maintain calm in other challenging situations, such as not eating more even when the food tastes good and not eating when you're not hungry," said lead researcher Dr Alan Kristal.

Quick check. How to stop Emotional Eating:

- Learn to recognise a negative emotion
- Find other ways to comfort yourself
- Observe the bodily sensation of real hunger
- If you make the decision to eat, do not feel guilty about it
- Save your sweet tooth for something special
- Identify and eliminate food sensitivities to wheat or dairy.
- Get 8 hours of sleep