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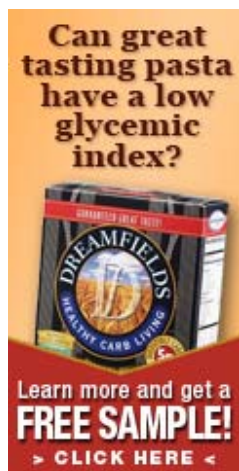
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On an Emotional Roller Coaster

Consider this question: *"Why do we eat?"* Answers run the gamut: *"I'm hungry."* *"It's time to eat."* *"Everyone else is eating."* *"Someone offered me food and it's not polite to refuse."* *"I'm tired."* *"I'm bored."* Many people also eat to fill an emotional void. If we eat when we're sad, under stress, angry, or lonely, then emotions most likely are driving our behavior, rather than hunger. Everyone eats due to emotions at some point. But it can become a habit that can interfere both with the ability to meet true emotional needs at the same time that it causes weight problems.



Emotions or Physical Hunger?

Emotional eating is in vogue. It often seems that by confessing our emotional eating problem we take away responsibility for our actions. Mimi Francis, BSN, RN, MSN, behavioral health therapist at Green Mountain at Fox Run, a healthy weight loss retreat for women in Ludlow, Vermont, observes, "All too often, a person believes she is too much of an emotional eater when the real problem is how she feeds herself. Sometimes nonsupportive eating behaviors are the result of getting too hungry, which can lead to overeating, which often then starts the emotional eating response. When many people begin to feed themselves well-balanced, regular meals and snacks, their 'emotional eating problem' goes away." Doreen Virtue, PhD, author of *The Yo-Yo Diet Syndrome*, describes the differences between emotional eating and eating due to physical hunger:

1. Emotional eating comes on quickly, where physical hunger occurs gradually over minutes or even hours. Grabbing a few handfuls of cookies after an argument with your teenage daughter leaves you angry and frustrated is emotional eating. Noticing you're getting hungry at 10:30 a.m., continuing with work, hearing your stomach grumble at 11 a.m., attending a meeting, and eating lunch at noon is responding to physical hunger.
2. Emotional eating requires a specific food to satisfy its hunger. Kathryn Fink, MS, RD, LD, Nutrition and Fitness Consultant at www.dietitianadvice.com talks with her clients about the apple test. When you crave a food or feel hungry, ask yourself if an apple will satisfy your hunger. If you really want a specific food (not an apple), then you're most likely responding to emotions instead of physical hunger.
3. If hunger originates in your mouth or your mind, where you can't stop thinking about a specific food, or all you're craving is the creamy, cold feeling of ice cream in your mouth, you're feeling emotional hunger. Physical hunger has physical symptoms: a growling stomach and an empty feeling.
4. Emotional eating demands that you eat right now. Physical hunger allows you to wait a few minutes.
5. If you can link a stressful situation to your hunger, then you're experiencing emotional eating. Coming home to an empty house after work may lead you to deal with loneliness by watching TV and eating. If confronting an angry colleague at work causes you to dive into the bowl of M&M's in the break room, you're dealing with stress and anger by eating.
6. Do you ever suddenly notice that you ate all the ice cream? Or all the potato chips? You may not even remember the act—or taste—of eating. Eating mindlessly is usually associated with emotional eating. Geneen Roth, author and nationally recognized expert on emotional eating, explains that allowing ourselves to go unconscious when we eat is an escape method

from difficult situations.

7. Eating past our point of fullness, sometimes until we're physically sick, is usually due to emotional eating. Eating second and even third helpings may be a way to try and deaden our emotions, not satisfy physical hunger. 8. How we feel after we eat is a clue into emotional eating. If we feel guilty, upset, angry, and embarrassed about what or how much we ate, then emotions fueled that eating.

Breaking the Cycle

Eating to deal with our emotions is a learned behavior according to Roger Gould, MD, former head of Community Psychiatry and Outpatient Psychiatry at UCLA and author of *Shrink Yourself: Break Free From Emotional Eating Forever*, a practical manual to free yourself from emotional eating. Gould explains that using food for reasons other than simple physical hunger is a normal part of our society. We celebrate with food, and we grieve with food. When we're children and get hurt, we may be comforted with an ice cream cone. When eating becomes the only way we know how to deal with difficult feelings and situations, we no longer believe we have the ability to solve problems without food. Gould recommends devising other ways to deal with these emotions as a way to take back power and control over our lives.

Figure out what's going on

Jessica B. Fishman, MS, RD, CDN, nutrition consultant for the New York Dermatology Group, helps her clients understand what causes emotional eating so they can develop ways to change their behaviors. She encourages them to think about emotional eating situations by first identifying the "fuel" or the cause of the emotion such as a bad day at work. Next they identify the "fuel category," such as social, situational, or psychological. Fishman helps them describe the feelings that lead to emotional eating in these situations, as well as the consequences of the eating. Clearly outlining the causes and thoughts that lead up to emotional eating sets the stage for developing alternative behaviors.

Replace eating with other behaviors

Cathy Leman, RD, LD, founder and owner of NutriFit, Inc, encourages her clients to make a list of alternatives to eating. "When in the throes of emotional eating it's extremely difficult to focus on anything else. Having something tangible, legible, and logical that they've created and can access at any time allows them to make the choice to go ahead and eat, or engage in one of their alternatives. They find that having that choice, particularly if they've never before felt that there was one, is empowering." One of my clients consistently found herself prowling through the kitchen at night, even when she wasn't hungry. She determined that she was bored, and that she didn't want eating to become her nighttime hobby! We developed a list of other activities for the evening hours: reading, walking on the treadmill, and listening to music. Each time she found herself in the kitchen, she'd ask what she really wanted to do, and more often than not she chose one of the other activities.

Take back power and control

Gould believes that emotional eating ultimately comes down to a feeling of powerlessness. When we eat because we're afraid of a situation or uncomfortable with a feeling, we reinforce the idea that we have no control, or power, to change the situation. He offers examples of how we can learn to take back power and stop the urge to eat. For instance, if we're dealing with a sick parent and feeling exhausted, we may fear that we just can't handle the situation and so overeat to stop the feelings. To develop power, we can analyze what's happening, understanding that while we have a lot to handle, it won't last forever and we can ask for help. The act of taking control over our emotions lessens the desire to eat.


Learn to change thoughts and judgments

Francis encourages participants at Green Mountain at Fox Run to work on three aspects of emotional eating:

1. Learn to feel emotions and express them in ways that are not harmful;
2. Examine the thinking behind these emotions; and
3. Let go of old stuff from the past.

Emotions are driven by thoughts, and different people may have vastly different emotions even in the same situation. Once we become aware of our emotions and the thoughts behind them, we can learn new behaviors that truly meet our needs. **A Long-term Solution to Weight Management**
How many times have you been on a diet? How many exercise plans, weight loss books, and diet programs have you tried? The experts I spoke with all agree that learning to understand how emotions fuel your eating, and developing new methods of dealing with emotions, is often the long-term solution to maintaining a healthy weight. And it's not a "diet" at all.

--Lynn Grieger is a sought-after speaker and writer on a variety of health and wellness topics. She's a registered dietitian; health, food and fitness coach; and certified personal trainer who empowers clients to improve their health and wellbeing in southwestern Vermont and online at www.LynnGrieger.com.



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