Tips to Understand and Reduce Emotional Eating

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Food companies know food is not just used for fuel, which is why they spend billions of dollars on advertisements that remind us that food can mean happiness, fun, and even love and happy relationships. Weight loss companies also know this, so they work to tell us that they have the perfect diet that will "take away hunger" and "obliterate" our extra weight. And also, we will never feel hungry, and will have glowing skin and good health forever. It is no wonder that it is difficult to reduce emotional eating!

The problem is, most of these products have nothing to support these claims and the more we focus on getting *rid* of hunger and using food as comfort, the more we end up disconnected from our body's true signals. This leaves us either feeling deprived when on our "diet", or guilty when off.

Emotions Can Affect Our Eating Choices

The ads are not completely lying. Food *does* help us to feel better and can help to soothe our emotions, at least in the short-term. Stress or other emotions can affect the *types* of choices we make (double cheeseburger instead of salad with grilled chicken) or the *amount* we eat (half a birthday cake instead of one slice). And for a few seconds, it absolutely works. Our brain's reward area becomes active, our body might feel a little calmer, and we feel good.

Unfortunately, the list of needs that food can meet goes on. Food can help us feel less bored. Often it can distract us from other things that are uncomfortable, like being dissatisfied with our job, our relationship(s), or the general direction of our life.

The problem is, when we eat when we are not actually hungry, it's actually *less* rewarding than eating when we are hungry. Over time, we feel less good when we eat cookies or pizza, so we need more of those high sugar, fat, or salty foods to get the same effect.

All of this makes binge eating, stress-eating, and emotional eating very common. These words are used often, but let's take a step back and talk about what they mean.

Stress-eating, **or** ***emotional eating*** is used to describe eating in response to a feeling. This could be eating in response to feeling down or depressed, anxious, angry, bored, or even joyful. It can also apply to eating that occurs when one cannot tolerate the discomfort they are feeling (eating to soothe physical pain or discomfort).

Binge eating means that the person feels a "loss of control" either before and/or during eating. This might mean that someone has a hard time stopping eating once they have started, or they have a hard time controlling their eating of certain foods. Often binge eating can lead to eating a large amount of food in a relatively short amount of time, and after binge eating, people may feel guilty or ashamed. Binge eating is more likely to occur when the person is alone, but can happen

in front of others. Typically, people will eat more quickly and will feel uncomfortably full after binge eating.

Compulsive eating is another, less common term for binge eating.

Overeating, describes eating past physical fullness. *Everyone* overeats from time to time. It can be caused by any of the above, or by simply overestimating how much food our bodies need (when our eyes are bigger than our stomach). For people who do not struggle with their weight or eating, they will overeat, but will usually either consciously or automatically eat a bit less at their next meal.

6 Tips To Reduce Your Emotional Eating

First of all, cut yourself a little slack. I am not talking about making excuses or ignoring the problem, but instead having some understanding of the fact that emotional eating is common.

Remember that:

- Our brains really like foods that keep the stress-eating cycle going
- It helps us self-soothe or "self-medicate" and get through difficult stressors
- When we are stressed, it's easier to grab quick and usually processed foods
- Most food and/or weight loss advertising companies are not doing anything to help the situation

That said, it is important to take control over your own life and your own choices, and break this habit now, as it will only get stronger with time. Just like building up new muscle, it can be hard at first, but it will become easier with practice. You will learn new habits, and they can be even more rewarding over time.

Here are some tips to change this pattern:

1. **Keep an eating and emotion journal.** Building awareness of what we are doing is key, and keeping a journal of our behavior is one of the best ways to do this. When you are not physically hungry but have an urge to eat, note the reason and what was going on at the time (Did someone say something that offended you? Were you bored? Were you at home? With friends?). The more you do this, the more you will be able to look for patterns.

2. **Rate your hunger.** In the same journal, rate your level of hunger before and after you eat (1=starving, 5 = neutral, 10 = stuffed) to see how hungry you are before and after meals and snacks. Ideally, you should be hungry, but not starving (about a 2-4 rating) before meals, and "satisfied" (about a 6-8 rating) after meals. Try to avoid getting to a 1 or a 10 if you can.

3. **Make your meal plan work for you.** Many people do not realize that they may feel "always hungry" simply because of the pattern of eating or the types of foods they are eating. Are you having some lean protein at most meals and snacks? Are you consuming high sugar, high carbohydrate, or highly processed foods regularly? If so, you may be creating what is often

referred to as a food addiction, and simply cutting out these foods for 2-3 weeks could drastically reduce your cravings.

4. **Make your environment work for you.** You don't have control over how food is advertised and how many fast food places exist in your town/city, but you do have control over:

- What foods and portion sizes you bring into your home
- What places you drive by on your commute (can change routes if it's really hard to not stop at that Taco Bell)
- What is on your counters at home (keep healthy foods ready and in sight; keep sugary refined foods out of sight!)
- The size of your serving dishes (smaller dishes make people serve and eat less without realizing it)

5. **Meet the needs that food was trying to meet.** This is perhaps the most important. Remember, your brain is trying to get something good for you by telling you to eat those cookies. What is it? Comfort? Relief from boredom? Excitement? Fun? Relaxation? Distraction? Whatever the need, there are other activities or things that can and will meet that need, especially with practice. I know it does not seem like doing a crossword could really replace those cookies, but with enough time, our brains adjust and learn to get reward and enjoyment from other things. Be creative, try a few new activities, be patient, and keep an open mind. Make sure you really pat yourself on the back every time you resist an old craving or habit and know that each time you do something non-food related, you are making it easier for you to keep doing this long-term.

6. **Try stress-eating mindfully.** Next time you want to eat when you are not hungry, do so slowly and mindfully. Sit down at a table, take the food, and observe its smell and texture. Put it in your mouth and chew painfully slowly, and see what you think. Practice enjoying it without guilt and see how that feels. How does it change the experience?

There are a lot of reasons that so many of us struggle with emotional eating and the food and weight loss industry do not do us any favors. It is, however, a habit that is changeable. Some of these tips are a great place to start, but if you are still having difficulty, you may benefit from talking with a professional for additional support.

About the Author *Shawn Katterman, PhD, is a licensed clinical psychologist who works with the Bariatric Surgery and Preventive Cardiology departments at Spectrum Health System in Grand Rapids, MI. Dr. Katterman earned her master's degree and doctorate in clinical psychology from Drexel University. She completed a predoctoral internship and post-doctoral fellowship in clinical health psychology at Rush University Medical Center. Dr. Katterman's research and clinical interests include cognitive-behavioral therapy for weight management, stress-related eating, binge eating, anxiety and depression. She is passionate about helping people make/maintain healthy lifestyle changes.*