

Emotional Eating: Feeding Your Feelings

Eating to feed a feeling, and not a growling stomach, is emotional eating.

When you're happy, your food of choice could be steak or pizza, when you're sad it could be ice cream or cookies, and when you're bored it could be potato chips. Food does more than fill our stomachs -- it also satisfies feelings, and when you quench those feelings with comfort food when your stomach isn't growling, that's emotional eating.

"Emotional eating is eating for reasons other than hunger," says Jane Jakubczak, a registered dietitian at the University of Maryland. "Instead of the physical symptom of hunger initiating the eating, an emotion triggers the eating."

What are the telltale signs of emotional eating, what foods are the most likely culprits when it comes to emotional eating, and how it can be overcome? Experts help WebMD find the answers.

How to Tell the Difference

There are several differences between emotional hunger and physical hunger, according to the University of Texas Counseling and Mental Health Center web site:

1. Emotional hunger comes on suddenly; physical hunger occurs gradually.
2. When you are eating to fill a void that isn't related to an empty stomach, you crave a specific food, such as pizza or ice cream, and only that food will meet your need. When you eat because you are actually hungry, you're open to options.
3. Emotional hunger feels like it needs to be satisfied instantly with the food you crave; physical hunger can wait.
4. Even when you are full, if you're eating to satisfy an emotional need, you're more likely to keep eating. When you're eating because you're hungry, you're more likely to stop when you're full.
5. Emotional eating can leave behind feelings of guilt; eating when you are physically hungry does not.

Comfort Foods

When emotional hunger rumbles, one of its distinguishing characteristics is that you're focused on a particular food, which is likely a comfort food.

"Comfort foods are foods a person eats to obtain or maintain a feeling," says Brian Wansink, PhD, director of the Food and Brand Lab at the University of Illinois. "Comfort foods are often wrongly associated with negative moods, and indeed, people often consume them when they're down or depressed, but interestingly enough, comfort foods are also consumed to maintain good moods."

Ice cream is first on the comfort food list. After ice cream, comfort foods break down by sex: For women it's chocolate and cookies; for men it's pizza, steak, and casserole, explains Wansink.

And what you reach for when eating to satisfy an emotion depends on the emotion. According to an article by Wansink, published in the July 2000 *American Demographics*, "The types of comfort foods a person is drawn toward varies depending on their mood. People in happy moods tended to prefer ... foods such as pizza or steak (32%). Sad people reached for ice cream and cookies 39% of the time, and 36% of bored people opened up a bag of potato chips."

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Overfeeding Emotions

"We all eat for emotional reasons sometimes," says Jakubczak, who has talked to college students at the University of Maryland about emotional eating.

When eating becomes the only or main strategy a person uses to manage emotions, explains Jakubczak, then problems arise -- especially if the foods a person is choosing to eat to satisfy emotions aren't exactly healthy.

"If you eat when you are not hungry, chances are your body does not need the calories," says Jakubczak. "If this happens too often, the extra calories get stored as fat, and too much fat storage can cause one to be overweight, which may present some health risks."

According to an interview with Jakubczak on the University of Maryland web site, 75% of overeating is caused by emotions, so dealing with emotions appropriately is important.

Recognizing Emotional Eating

"The first thing one needs to do to overcome emotional eating is to recognize it," says Jakubczak. "Keeping a food record and ranking your hunger from 1-10 each time you put something in your mouth will bring to light 'if' and 'when' you are eating for reasons other than hunger."

Next, you need to learn techniques that help manage emotions besides eating, explains Jakubczak.

"Oftentimes when a child is sad, we cheer them up with a sweet treat," says Jakubczak. "This behavior gets reinforced year after year until we are practicing the same behavior as adults. We never learned how to deal with the sad feeling because we always pushed it away with a sweet treat. Learning how to deal with feelings without food is a new skill many of us need to learn."

Managing Emotional Eating

Here are a few tips to help you deal with emotional eating:

- Recognize emotional eating and learn what triggers this behavior in you.
- Make a list of things to do when you get the urge to eat and you're not hungry, and carry it with you, according to the Tufts Nutrition web site. When you feel overwhelmed, you can put off that desire by doing another enjoyable activity.
- Try taking a walk, calling a friend, playing cards, cleaning your room, doing laundry, or something productive to take your mind off the craving -- even taking a nap, according to the Tufts Nutrition web site.
- When you do get the urge to eat when you're not hungry, find a comfort food that's healthy instead of junk food. "Comfort foods don't need to be unhealthy," says Wansink.
- For some, leaving comfort foods behind when they're dieting can be emotionally difficult. Wansink tells WebMD, "The key is moderation, not elimination." He suggests dividing comfort foods into smaller portions. For instance, if you have a large bag of chips, divide it into smaller containers or baggies and the temptation to eat more than one serving can be avoided.
- When it comes to comfort foods that aren't always healthy, like fattening desserts, Wansink also offers this piece of information: "Your memory of a food peaks after about four bites, so if you only have those bites, a week later you'll recall it as just a good experience than if you polished off the whole thing." So have a few bites of cheesecake, then call it quits, and you'll get equal the pleasure with lower cost.

Lastly, remember that emotional eating is something that most people do when they're bored, happy, or sad. It might be a bag of chips or a steak, but whatever the food choice, learning how to control it and using moderation are key.

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