Emotional Eating: Feeding Feelings

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Few of us eat only when we are hungry. Often we eat to feed feelings, not to fill our stomachs. We eat because we are bored, or stressed, or depressed, or even because we are happy. And the things we are drawn to when we eat emotionally, while undeniably delicious, are rarely healthy choices – the mid-afternoon candy bar at work, or the bowl of ice cream in the evening, for example.

Take this little quiz to see how much of an issue emotional eating is for you.

Emotional Eating Quiz: Do You Feed Feelings?

How often do you eat emotionally – eat when you are not hungry or keep eating when you have had enough – in each of the following situations?

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
1. When I'm trying to relax				
2. When I'm sad				
3. When I'm bored				
4. When I'm happy				
5. At home in evening				
6. At home during the day				
7. At work				
8. In social situations				

The more questions you answered often or always, the more you eat emotionally. If you answered all questions "never" or "sometimes", emotional eating is probably not much of a problem for you. If you answered any question "often" or "always" emotional eating is probably a bigger issue.

Everyone eats emotionally at least occasionally. That's because we all feel stressed, or bored, or like celebrating from time to time. Eating something tasty when you are feeling any of those things is simply and immediately satisfying. But when you are feeding feelings, the fix is fleeting. Many people say the pleasure is gone almost as soon as the food is. What linger are guilt and the extra calories you have consumed. So curbing emotional eating can improve your mental and physical health.

Tips for curbing emotional eating

Give yourself what you really need. You can find better ways than eating to relax, to lift your spirits, or to protect yourself from boredom. The first step is to recognize when you are eating for one of these reasons, and not because you are really hungry. Practice helps you recognize when they are eating emotionally.

When is that most likely to happen to you? Is it mid-afternoons at work when you are feeling bored? Evenings when you are trying to relax? Parties when you want to have a good time?

Can you think of anything other than food that might help? Start with anything that has ever worked for you in the past.

Experiment. If you depend on that big blueberry muffin in the afternoon to get you to the end of the work day (and wish you didn't), brainstorm for alternative sources of satisfaction. Could you bring something to work that was just as delicious but healthier, or buy something healthier there? Could you skip food altogether and do something else that was special during your break, like read your favorite magazine, call a friend, or take a walk? Try every idea that has a chance of succeeding until you find some that work for you. Remember, no plan will *eliminate* emotional eating, but if you experiment you can come up with tricks that will help you curb it, and that's a good thing.

Don't depend on willpower. Don't enter the valley of temptation any more often than you must. At home that means limiting the availability of foods you tend to eat emotionally, because what stays out of the house stays out of your mouth. Buy only small quantities of foods you are vulnerable to. Portion control also helps. Avoid eating "family style;" keep pans and bowls at the stove or counter, and sit down to meals with only the amount of food you intend to eat. Do the same when you plan to eat in front of the television. It takes effort to master portion control, but it takes less effort than trying to resist something you crave when it is in easy reach.

When you eat out, choose the things you want most and pass up things that matter less to you. If you want a dessert, for example, could you skip the bread and appetizer? Don't stuff yourself. Stop when you have had enough instead of continuing to eat, and you will have a delicious meal from the leftovers tomorrow instead of a too-full stomach tonight.

Eat consciously. This might seem outlandish to some people, but I recommend not eating while you are doing other things. When you eat while you are watching television or concentrating on other things you generally have no idea what you are eating, let alone what it tastes like or how much you have consumed.

Eating consciously is a different experience. When you pay attention to what you are eating you can actually taste – and hopefully enjoy – the food. Savoring every bite of something really delicious can bring far greater satisfaction than consuming vast quantities unconsciously.

I realize that I am describing an ideal, but it is one I believe in striving for. If you must watch television while you eat, practice portion control and use the commercial breaks as an opportunity to note and enjoy what you are eating.

Maintain your motivation. As I said, the goal is *curbing* emotional eating, not eliminating it. I hope some of the tips I offered help you do just that. Keep experimenting until you find a plan that works for you. Don't forget, Thomas Edison was once asked by a reporter why he did not give up after 5,000 experiments had "failed" to produce the first electric light bulb. Edison responded, "I haven't failed once; I'm 5,000 steps closer to the solution." Edison's experiments continued until he reached his goal. Experimenting will also help you reach your goal of less emotional eating, and it probably won't take 5,000 experiments to get there.