

# EMOTIONAL EATER

When you're overwhelmed by feelings – anxiety, anger, sadness, happiness, loneliness or just plain boredom, you turn to food to help you deal with your feelings. In the moment you may not respond to your physical hunger cues, or even care as much about your healthy eating goals. Instead you may feel driven by the emotional need to feel comforted. You may then feel upset and guilty about it, and those negative feelings may lead you to give up on your plan.

## GOAL:

*To become aware of the emotions that can lead you to eat. Learn to eat in response to your hunger cues.*

## RECOGNISING EMOTIONAL VS. STOMACH HUNGER

If you have struggled with emotional eating, you may have taught yourself to ignore the physical signs for hunger. You may need to re-teach yourself to identify these signals. Here are some common signs of emotional hunger vs. stomach hunger, to help you recognise the difference:

### *Signs of Emotional Hunger*

Occurs based on a thought, feeling or situation

Occurs suddenly and involves cravings for a certain food

Tends to lead to 'mindless munching' or lack of awareness when eating

Leads to eating beyond the point of satisfaction, followed by feelings of guilt

### *Signs of Stomach Hunger*

Usually occurs every 3-4 hours, accompanied by symptoms such as stomach growling, stomach emptiness / pain, slight headache, fatigue

Comes on gradually and can be satisfied by various food options

Involves awareness of food choices and quantity eaten

Leads to eating until physically satisfied, with no associated guilt

## IDENTIFYING YOUR EMOTIONAL EATING TRIGGERS AND HEALTHY ALTERNATIVES

Many eating habits begin for a reason and emotional eating is no different. You may not even be aware of the exact emotions triggering you to eat but there was a point in time where eating may have made you feel comforted or at ease. It is completely normal to dislike feeling lonely, angry or frustrated, and it is also common for people to turn to food to deal with these emotions. It is now important for you to be consciously aware of your feelings. When you find yourself reaching for food when you are not hungry, ask yourself if you are feeling:

- |                                   |                                   |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Angry       | <input type="radio"/> Fatigued    |
| <input type="radio"/> Happy       | <input type="radio"/> Bored       |
| <input type="radio"/> Restless    | <input type="radio"/> Excited     |
| <input type="radio"/> Sad         | <input type="radio"/> Frustrated  |
| <input type="radio"/> Lonely      | <input type="radio"/> Anxious     |
| <input type="radio"/> Discouraged | <input type="radio"/> Other ..... |

Once you have identified your emotional eating triggers, you can then prepare to deal with them in healthy, non-food ways.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself to understand your needs to find a non-food way to meet them.

- » ***Do you need rest or relaxation?***  
Try taking a bath, have a massage, or take some time to do yoga or meditation.
- » ***Do you need support?***  
Try calling a friend or family member, or even reach out to your Consultant.
- » ***Do you need to release some tension?***  
Try going for a walk or try a class at the gym.
- » ***Do you need something else?*** .....

## USING NON-FOOD REWARDS

By using non-food rewards you can meet your physical and emotional wants and needs as they arise. If you feel cared for, you may be less likely to feel the need to reward yourself with food. For example you could plan a weekend getaway or treat yourself to a night at the movies.

## HOW TO MANAGE CRAVINGS AND EMOTIONAL EATING

What happens if you have the emotional urge to eat that just will not go away? It is possible to break the experience into a series of decisions and by doing so, you remind yourself that you are in control and you can choose to continue and eat, or stop and choose an alternative action at any point along the way when you are on the verge of emotional eating.

Here is a simple strategy to break the chain of behaviour that frequently leads to emotional eating:

### ***1. Stop and think about how you're feeling and what's happened in your day***

'Did I have a bad day at work?', 'Am I stressed?', 'Am I feeling anxious about my presentation tomorrow?'

What emotion are you feeling right now, or did you feel leading up to this?

### ***2. Recognise that this emotion is natural and normal***

It is normal to feel sad, angry, frustrated or upset. It is also natural to want to get rid of these feelings as quickly as possible.

### ***3. Ask yourself why you want to eat***

Are you trying to stop feeling a certain way? Are you procrastinating? It is important to NOTICE what this emotion is and not judge yourself for feeling this way. Remember, all thoughts and feelings are normal.

### ***4. Pause to consider what you want to do next***

Focus on your breathing and pause for a minute.

## 5. *Decide whether or not to eat*

Remember you don't have to choose to eat. Ask yourself, 'How will I feel if I choose to eat? How will I feel if I don't?'. If you decide not to eat, refer back to the suggestions for non-food ways to meet your needs on page 2.

## 6. *If you decide to eat, decide on what you'll eat*

'What is it I'm really hungry for - or am I really hungry?'

## 7. *Decide to serve yourself a moderate portion of that food*

Refer to your Grocery Guide for portion sizes and how you can fit the food into your menu plan.

## 8. *Eat slowly and mindfully*

Think about how you feel eating the food. How does it feel in your mouth, how does it taste, what sensations are you getting? Do you feel like the food is soothing? Is it taking away your unpleasant emotions? Is it enhancing positive ones?

## 9. *Accept your decision to eat*

Don't get upset with yourself for choosing to eat. It is important that you recognise what triggered your desire to eat and your emotions associated with the event. Understanding more about your personal triggers will help you manage challenging moments in the future.

*Feelings are much  
like waves, we can't  
stop them from coming  
but we can choose which  
ones to surf.*  
- Jonatan Mårtensson