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Emotional Eating Behavior

Emotional eating is consuming food for reasons other than physical hunger. Humans are emotional, social beings and food plays a large role in interactions with others. Many celebrations and holidays revolve around food and dining together. This is a normal and enjoyable aspect of being social human creatures.

Emotional eating becomes problematic when people eat for reasons such as stress, boredom, sadness, anxiety or loneliness. Triggers for emotional eating are not always negative events. Some people find that they eat whenever they feel happy or excited.

People who eat for emotional reasons often experience feelings of disappointment, guilt or failure after overeating. It often sets off a destructive cycle of overeating and dieting, which is detrimental to mental and physical health. The key to successful weight management lies in identifying emotional eating patterns and devising strategies to overcome trigger situations.

- Identifying Patterns
- Tips for Overcoming Emotional Eating
- Resources

Identifying Patterns

The best way to identify eating for emotional reasons is to keep a food journal. In the food journal, use the "5 W's" method to help determine a pattern:

- Who you were with?
- What did you eat?
- When did you eat?
- Where did you eat?

- Why did you eat?

Be sure to note how you were feeling and how much was eaten as well.

Studies show that people who log their food habits are more successful at weight loss and weight management than those who do not keep a log. Identifying emotional eating triggers allows for the development of strategies to overcome destructive behaviors.

Tips for Overcoming Emotional Eating

- **Harness the power of self-talk:** Identify and recognize times of negative and self-defeating statements such as, "I cannot do this" or "I failed." Replace those statements with positive and goal-targeted comments such as, "This is hard but it will be worth it" and "I will learn and make a better choice next time." It is helpful to also mark these statements in a food journal.
- **Rate your hunger:** Before reaching for food, rate your hunger on a scale from 1-10, 10 being ravenous. For ratings of 5 or less, opt for a lighter meal or snack. If you find you are not hungry enough to eat a snack, emotions are more likely driving the urge to eat. Food will not satisfy a person eating for emotional reasons. Instead, it is important to discover other positive and productive ways to address the issues.
- **Find alternatives:** People who found comfort in food in the past are likely to turn to it again in the future. It is important to find other ways to deal with positive and negative stressors in life. Go for a walk, read a book, take a bath, listen to music or do deep breathing exercises. When you find something that works, refer to it again later.
- **Three bite rule:** Humans experience the greatest pleasure from food in the first three bites. After that, senses become dulled. Take three bites of your favorite indulgent foods and focus on fully enjoying them.
- **Practice good dental hygiene:** Chewing a strong mint gum, breath mint or brushing teeth right after a meal may deter the urge to overeat.
- **Progress, not perfection:** As with any new practice, there is always that initial stage of excitement and motivation to make changes. Prepare for the ups and downs and understand they are a natural process of learning and are to be expected. Stay vigilant in monitoring triggers as they change over time. The key to success is to remain focused and keep pushing forward. Celebrate every small success and find joy in achievements. Every small victory is closer to obtaining your goal.

Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/losing_weight/eating_habits.html
(http://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/losing_weight/eating_habits.html)

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To obtain a referral to a local provider for face-to-face evaluation in your community for assistance with emotional issues.

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