

Emotional Eating Can Sabotage Even Your Best Dieting Efforts

For many people, the biggest obstacle to shedding extra pounds or eating more healthfully is emotion-based eating. Emotional eating can sabotage even your most well-intentioned efforts. And if gaining unwanted pounds wasn't bad enough, emotional eating also results in decidedly undesirable feelings of self-defeat and low self-esteem...

"Emotional eating," typically triggered by stress and anxiety, too often leads to overeating and/or making poor food choices. One recent study in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders* compares the daily journals kept by a group of normal-weight women, half of whom were binge-eaters. Those who engaged in binge-eating rated daily hassles as significantly more stressful than those who did not.

A key influence on emotional eating, however, is not just negative or stressful events, but rather it's people's response to them. People who are typically less thrown off by stress tend to focus on how they want to constructively deal with a negative situation or they simply put it aside and move on. Those who tend to experience more disruption due to negative situations are more inclined to stay focused on the problem, mentally replaying a distressing situation over and over and over again.

How Do You Cope With Stress?

Experts say that people whose healthy-eating goals are often disrupted by emotions can benefit from finding new strategies to help them respond more effectively to stressful situations. A study in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* found that people gave in to eating temptations every time they didn't have a strategy to deal with stressful situations. But when they responded with some form of either positive thoughts or actions, they were able to beat those temptations 50% to 60% of the time.

Research indicates that individuals who respond to a negative situation with both positive thoughts and constructive action are able to avoid emotion-based eating 85% of the time. Examples of positive thinking include reminding yourself that the problem is not really as big as it seems, that you can handle it, or by brainstorming different approaches to the problem to find the most effective solution. Action responses might include attempts to fix a problem by asking a friend, family member, or associate for their advice, or through calming and soothing yourself by taking a walk, listening to music, or deep breathing.

What's Behind the Hunger?

Nutritionists Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch, in their book *Intuitive Hunger*, note that many people use food as a means to distract themselves from emotions ranging from simple boredom to frustration to elevated anxiety. Tribole and Resch recommend differentiating between biological hunger and other urges to eat, and trying to identify the

feelings and needs behind non-hunger urges to eat. For example, sometimes an unmet need for nurturing can be satisfied by spending time with a friend, playing with a pet, or soaking in a tub.

Tribole and Resch emphasize that taking time out to eat is often more socially acceptable than taking time out simply because we need a break. They suggest learning to acknowledge that simply taking a break is quite appropriate when we need rest or distraction or refreshing relief from routine. If you're not hungry, use breaks to read, nap, take a walk, or telephone a friend.

Curb Emotional Eating Habits and Live a Longer, Healthier Life

Research shows that emotional eating can be a significant source of excess calories. Excess calories can result in overweight or obesity, which can increase the risk for several forms of cancer as well as diabetes and other serious health problems. The American Institute for Cancer Research emphasizes the need to choose portions appropriate to our individual needs and to avoid popular "super-sized" foods. But remember, emotional eating is controlled not only with healthier foods or smaller portions, but by getting whatever help and support you need to learn how to handle non-hunger urges to eat without actually turning to food for temporary solace.