



## Emotional Eating

### How to Recognize and Stop Emotional and Stress Eating



It's the reason why so many diets fail: We don't always eat just to satisfy hunger. Many of us also turn to food to relieve stress or cope with unpleasant emotions such as sadness, loneliness, or boredom. And after eating, we feel even worse. Not only does the original emotional issue remain, but we also feel guilty for overeating. No matter how powerless you feel over food cravings, though, there is an answer. By practicing mindful eating, you can change the emotional habits that have sabotaged your diet in the past, and regain control over both food and your feelings.

### What is emotional eating?

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Emotional eating (or stress eating) is using food to make yourself feel better—eating to satisfy emotional needs, rather than to satisfy physical hunger. You might reach for a pint of ice cream when you're feeling down, order a pizza if you're bored or lonely, or swing by the drive-through after a stressful day at work.

Occasionally using food as a pick me up, a reward, or to celebrate isn't necessarily a bad thing. But when eating is your primary emotional coping mechanism—when your first impulse is to open the refrigerator whenever you're stressed, upset, angry, lonely, exhausted, or bored—you get stuck in an unhealthy cycle where the real feeling or problem is never addressed.

Emotional hunger can't be filled with food. Eating may feel good in the moment, but the feelings that triggered the eating are still there. And you often feel worse than you did before because of the unnecessary calories you've just consumed.

No matter how powerless you feel over food and your feelings, it is possible to make a positive change. You can find healthier ways to deal with your emotions, learn to eat mindfully instead of mindlessly, regain control of your weight, and finally put a stop to emotional eating.

### Are you an emotional eater?

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- Do you eat more when you're feeling stressed?
- Do you eat when you're not hungry or when you're full?
- Do you eat to feel better (to calm and soothe yourself when you're sad, mad, bored, anxious, etc.)?
- Do you reward yourself with food?
- Do you regularly eat until you've stuffed yourself?
- Does food make you feel safe? Do you feel like food is a friend?
- Do you feel powerless or out of control around food?

## The difference between emotional hunger and physical hunger

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Emotional hunger can be powerful, so it's easy to mistake it for physical hunger. But there are clues you can look for to help you tell physical and emotional hunger apart.

**Emotional hunger comes on suddenly.** It hits you in an instant and feels overwhelming and urgent. Physical hunger, on the other hand, comes on more gradually. The urge to eat doesn't feel as dire or demand instant satisfaction (unless you haven't eaten for a very long time).

**Emotional hunger craves specific comfort foods.** When you're physically hungry, almost anything sounds good—including healthy stuff like vegetables. But emotional hunger craves junk food or sugary snacks that provide an instant rush. You feel like you *need* cheesecake or pizza, and nothing else will do.

**Emotional hunger often leads to mindless eating.** Before you know it, you've eaten a whole bag of chips or an entire pint of ice cream without really paying attention or fully enjoying it. When you're eating in response to physical hunger, you're typically more aware of what you're doing.

**Emotional hunger isn't satisfied once you're full.** You keep wanting more and more, often eating until you're uncomfortably stuffed. Physical hunger, on the other hand, doesn't need to be stuffed. You feel satisfied when your stomach is full.

**Emotional hunger isn't located in the stomach.** Rather than a growling belly or a pang in your stomach, you feel your hunger as a craving you can't get out of your head. You're focused on specific textures, tastes, and smells.

**Emotional hunger often leads to regret, guilt, or shame.** When you eat to satisfy physical hunger, you're unlikely to feel guilty or ashamed because you're simply giving your body what it needs. If you feel guilty after you eat, it's likely because you know deep down that you're not eating for nutritional reasons.

## Identify your emotional eating triggers

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What situations, places, or feelings make you reach for the comfort of food? Most emotional eating is linked to unpleasant feelings, but it can also be triggered by positive emotions, such as rewarding yourself for achieving a goal or celebrating a holiday or happy event. Common causes of emotional eating include:

**Stress** – Ever notice how stress makes you hungry? It's not just in your mind. When stress is chronic, your body produces as it so often is in our chaotic, fast-paced world, it leads to high levels of the stress hormone, cortisol. Cortisol triggers cravings for salty, sweet, and fried foods—foods that give you a burst of energy and pleasure. The more [uncontrolled stress in your life](/articles/stress/stress-management.htm) (/articles/stress/stress-management.htm), the more likely you are to turn to food for emotional relief.

**Stuffing emotions** – Eating can be a way to temporarily silence or “stuff down” uncomfortable emotions, including anger, fear, sadness, anxiety, loneliness, resentment, and shame. While you're numbing yourself with food, you can avoid the difficult emotions you'd rather not feel.

**Boredom or feelings of emptiness** – Do you ever eat simply to give yourself something to do, to relieve boredom, or as a way to fill a void in your life? You feel unfulfilled and empty, and food is a way to occupy your mouth and your time. In the moment, it fills you up and distracts you from underlying feelings of purposelessness and dissatisfaction with your life.

**Childhood habits** – Think back to your childhood memories of food. Did your parents reward good behavior with ice cream, take you out for pizza when you got a good report card, or serve you sweets when you were feeling sad? These habits can often carry over into adulthood. Or your eating may be driven by nostalgia—for cherished memories of grilling burgers in the backyard with your dad or baking and eating cookies with your mom.

**Social influences** – Getting together with other people for a meal is a great way to relieve stress, but it can also lead to overeating. It's easy to overindulge simply because the food is there or because everyone else is eating. You may also overeat in social situations out of nervousness. Or perhaps your family or circle of friends encourages you to overeat, and it's easier to go along with the group.

## Find other ways to feed your feelings

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If you don't know how to manage your emotions in a way that doesn't involve food, you won't be able to control your eating habits for very long. Diets so often fail because they offer logical nutritional advice which only works if you have conscious control over your eating habits. It doesn't work when emotions hijack the process, demanding an immediate payoff with food. In order to stop emotional eating, you have to find other ways to fulfill yourself emotionally.

In order to stop emotional eating, you have to find other ways to fulfill yourself emotionally. It's not enough to understand the cycle of emotional eating or even to understand your triggers, although that's a huge first step. You need alternatives to food that you can turn to for emotional fulfillment.

### Alternatives to emotional eating

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**If you're depressed or lonely**, call someone who always makes you feel better, play with your dog or cat, or look at a favorite photo or cherished memento.

**If you're anxious**, expend your nervous energy by dancing to your favorite song, squeezing a stress ball, or taking a brisk walk.

**If you're exhausted**, treat yourself with a hot cup of tea, take a bath, light some scented candles, or wrap yourself in a warm blanket.

**If you're bored**, read a good book, watch a comedy show, explore the outdoors, or turn to an activity you enjoy (woodworking, playing the guitar, shooting hoops, scrapbooking, etc.).

## What is mindful eating?

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Mindful eating is a practice that develops your awareness of eating habits and allows you to pause between your triggers and your actions. Most emotional eaters feel powerless over their food cravings. When the urge to eat hits, you feel an almost unbearable tension that demands to be fed, right now. Because you've tried to resist in the past and failed, you believe that your willpower just isn't up to snuff. But the truth is that you have more power over your cravings than you think.

### Take 5 before you give in to a craving

Emotional eating tends to be automatic and virtually mindless. Before you even realize what you're doing, you've reached for a tub of ice cream and polished off half of it. But if you can take a moment to pause and reflect when you're hit with a craving, you give yourself the opportunity to make a different decision.

**Can you put off eating for five minutes?** Or just start with one minute. Don't tell yourself you *can't* give in to the craving; remember, the forbidden is extremely tempting. Just tell yourself to wait.

**While you're waiting, check in with yourself.** How are you feeling? What's going on emotionally? Even if you end up eating, you'll have a better understanding of why you did it. This can help you set yourself up for a different response next time.

### Learn to accept your feelings—even the bad ones

While it may seem that the core problem is that you're powerless over food, emotional eating actually stems from feeling powerless over your emotions. You don't feel capable of dealing with your feelings head on, so you avoid them with food.

Allowing yourself to feel uncomfortable emotions can be scary. You may fear that, like Pandora's box, once you open the door you won't be able to shut it. But the truth is that when we don't obsess over or suppress our emotions, even the most painful and difficult feelings subside relatively quickly and lose their power to control our attention. To do this

you need to become mindful and learn [how to stay connected to your moment-to-moment emotional experience](https://www.healthy.com/food/emotional-intelligence-toolkit/index.htm) (/emotional-intelligence-toolkit/index.htm). This can enable you to rein in stress and repair emotional problems that often trigger emotional eating.

## 8 steps to mindful eating

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*This ancient practice can transform the way you think about food and set the stage for a lifetime of healthy eating.*

Like most of us, you've probably eaten something in the past few hours. And, like many of us, you may not be able to recall everything you ate, let alone the sensation of eating it. Because we're working, driving, reading, watching television, or fiddling with an electronic device, we're not fully aware of what we're eating.

By truly paying attention to the food you eat, you may indulge in foods like a cheeseburger and fries less often. In essence, mindful eating means being fully attentive to your food—as you buy, prepare, serve, and consume it. In the book *Savor: Mindful Eating, Mindful Life*, Dr. Lillian Cheung and her co-author, Buddhist spiritual leader Thich Nhat Hanh, suggest several practices that can help you get there, including those listed below.

**1. Begin with your shopping list.** Consider the health value of every item you add to your list and stick to it to avoid impulse buying when you're shopping. Fill most of your cart in the produce section and avoid the center aisles—which are heavy with processed foods—and the chips and candy at the check-out counter.

**2. Come to the table with an appetite—but not when ravenously hungry.** If you skip meals, you may be so eager to get anything in your stomach that your first priority is filling the void instead of enjoying your food.

**3. Start with a small portion.** It may be helpful to limit the size of your plate to nine inches or less.

**4. Appreciate your food.** Pause for a minute or two before you begin eating to contemplate everything and everyone it took to bring the meal to your table. Silently express your gratitude for the opportunity to enjoy delicious food and the companions you're enjoying it with.

**5. Bring all your senses to the meal.** When you're cooking, serving, and eating your food, be attentive to color, texture, aroma, and even the sounds different foods make as you prepare them. As you chew your food, try identifying all the ingredients, especially seasonings.

**6. Take small bites.** It's easier to taste food completely when your mouth isn't full. Put down your utensil between bites.

**7. Chew thoroughly.** Chew well until you can taste the essence of the food. (You

may have to chew each mouthful 20 to 40 times, depending on the food.) You may be surprised at all the flavors that are released.

**8. Eat slowly.** If you follow the advice above, you won't bolt your food down. Devote at least five minutes to mindful eating before you chat with your tablemates.

**Adapted with permission from the [February 2016 Harvard Women's Health Watch](http://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/8-steps-to-mindful-eating) (<http://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/8-steps-to-mindful-eating>), monthly newsletter published by Harvard Health Publications.**

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