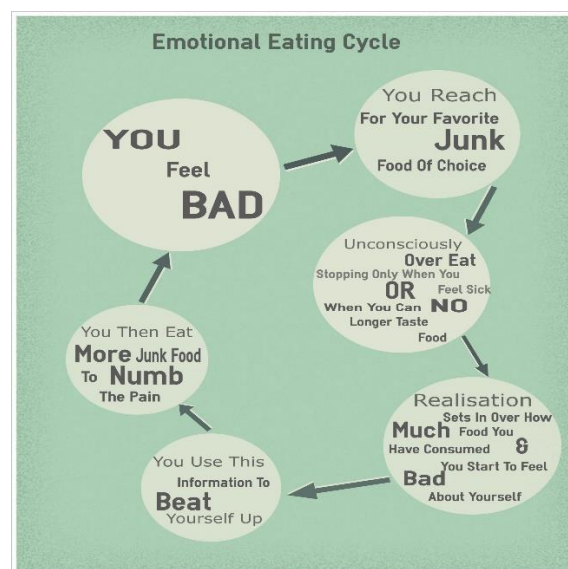# Emotional eating

Emotional eating is a coping mechanism and a way of finding short-term relief from many of life's challenges. It provides a release from discomfort and a short-term sense of pleasure and satisfaction when we're feeling something we don't want to feel. In other words – emotional eating is when we eat to numb negative feelings.

Emotional Eating Cycle

Using food to regularly cope with or numb emotions can also lead to excessive weight gain. There are numerous health risks associated with being overweight or obese. For example:

- heart disease
- stroke
- type 2 diabetes
- certain types of cancer

If you use food from time to time as a pick me up, as a reward, or to celebrate – that's not necessarily a bad thing. But when eating is your primary emotional coping mechanism — when your first impulse is to eat whenever you're upset, angry, lonely, stressed, exhausted, or bored - that's when you get stuck in an unhealthy cycle.

Many people self-medicate when faced with problems by eating comfort foods containing sugar and fat. Research shows that eating high-sugar and high-fat calorie dense foods reduces the stress response and "pacifies" the stressed person. There is no question that food is used as a cheap drug. It makes us feel better, at least it does so for a very short time.

Let's find out whether you are an emotional eater or not by completing the following self-assessment.

Are you an emotional eater?

Tick the column that best describes you

	Most of the time	Sometimes	Never
I eat when I'm sad.			
I eat when I'm bored.			
I eat when I'm exhausted.			
I eat when I'm depressed.			
I eat when I'm lonely.			
I eat when I'm anxious.			
I eat when I'm frustrated.			
I like to nurture people with food.			
I reward myself with food.			
I eat when times are tough.			
I eat when I'm angry.			
I eat when my energy is low.			
I eat when I'm stressed.			
I eat even when I'm not hungry.			
I use food to celebrate.			
I think about food most of the time.			
I binge eat.			
I crave sugary or fatty foods.			
I am embarrassed by how much I eat.			
I get upset with myself if I eat too much.			
I sneak or hide food.			
I eat everything that is placed in front of me.			
Food is the primary enjoyment in my life.			
I feel powerless or out of control around food.			

Scoring:
- Most of the time =   2 points
- Sometimes =   1 point
- Never =   0 points

Add your total points: _____

- If your overall score is more than 30, it is likely you have serious trouble with overeating.
- If your overall score is between10 – 30, you struggle with emotional eating at times and have room for improvement.
- If your overall score is below 10, you are not likely to be an emotional eater.

Step 1: Identify your triggers

The first step in putting a stop to emotional eating is identifying your triggers. What situations, places, or feelings make you want to eat?

Are you eating when you are stressed? Are you trying to fill a void in your life? Are you numbing yourself with food to avoid certain emotions? Are you rewarding yourself with food?

The best way to identify your triggers is by keeping a diary where you record what you eat and why. This will obviously take some time - you can do it over a week or more if you want to. Take the time to figure out what normally triggers your urge to eat. Write down what happened to upset you, how you felt before you ate, how you felt while you ate and how you felt after. Get very specific here. The more specific you can be, the easier it will be to identify what caused you to over-eat.

If you keep a diary for a while you should then see a pattern emerge. Once you identify those triggers, you can then do something about it.

My emotional eating diary

What did I eat?	
Where was I?	
Why did I eat?	
Who was I with?	
How did I feel before I ate?	
How did I feel while I ate?	
How did I feel after I ate?	
What was the trigger?	

What did I eat?	
Where was I?	
Why did I eat?	
Who was I with?	
How did I feel before I ate?	
How did I feel while I ate?	
How did I feel after I ate?	
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How did I feel while I ate?	
How did I feel after I ate?	
What was the trigger?	

What did I eat?	
Where was I?	
Why did I eat?	
Who was I with?	
How did I feel before I ate?	
How did I feel while I ate?	
How did I feel after I ate?	
What was the trigger?	

Step 2: Addressing the cause of emotional eating

In order to stop emotional eating for good you have to get to the bottom of the problem. Find out what caused the problem in the first place.

Whatever it is that makes you to turn to food for comfort, find a way to fix the cause. If you don't fix the underlying problems you have, you will always go back to the same coping mechanisms.

To do the next exercise, first go back over the emotional eating dairy you did before and use this as your basis. There you should have identified your triggers – those are the things you should list below. I want you to write down what issues you need to address and what possible solutions there are.

For some of you it might only be minor things that you can handle fairly quickly – for others there could be huge issues that could take a long time to fix. Whatever it is you need to work on – it will be worth it in the long run.

To give you an example: You might have identified that you eat comfort food because you are lonely and eating makes you feel better. The real issue in this case would be loneliness. Possible solutions could be things like joining clubs, volunteering for something where you can meet new people, working on yourself to overcome shyness …..

Write down your issues below and think of possible solutions.

Issues I need to work on	Solutions

✌ Step 3: Examine your thoughts

We generally self-medicate with food because of the challenges we face in life, such as loneliness, stress, problems in our marriage, financial worries, pressures at work, self-esteem issues and the list goes on. One very effective way to change this behavior of emotional eating is by changing the way we think.

WHAT WE THINK, WE ARE..

Thoughts — What we think, determines what we believe.

Positive Thinking

Beliefs — What we believe, determines how we feel.

Actions — The way we feel, influences how we are going to act.

Feelings

You can't live a positive life with negative mind.

What many people don't realize is that we can **choose** our thoughts. It is up to each one of us to decide how we will look at a certain event in our life – and as a consequence get the emotions that come with it.

We cannot always choose our life circumstances – we cannot always control what happens to us. But we can always choose how to look at those circumstances.

**It is how we interpret the events that happen to us that matter the most –
not so much what actually happens to us.**

The meaning we assign to a situation is what triggers our emotional response and not the event that has actually taken place.

No person, no event has the power to stress you out – it is only your interpretation of those events that can do that. It's only the thoughts you choose to think – that can stress you out.

Negative thoughts can undermine your weight loss efforts and definitely won't help overcome emotional eating.

To change your emotional overeating, let's identify what is going on in your mind and how you actually think. I would like you to write everything down that you tell yourself about your appearance, your body, your ability to manage your weight, your exercise level, your self-control and your life in general (use the table on the next page – under my current thinking column). Please be brutally honest with yourself - nobody needs to see what you write – this is just for you.

Once you've finished with the first column, the "My current thinking" column analyze your answers. Are they positive or negative? Any negative answers will work against you and are not helping you reach your goals. Therefore you need to change any negative answers to positive statements in the "Positive thinking" column. This does not mean that you should tell yourself a bunch of lies or pretend that everything is just fine – not at all. What you need to do is come up with an accurate and true positive statement.

Examples:

> *If you are embarrassed by your looks and think of yourself as fat – you can change this to a positive statement like: I feel much better now since I have started to exercise and eat healthy.*
>
> *If you think of yourself as a failure because so far you have never succeeded in losing weight – you could change this thought to: I will lose weight this time, because this is a complete lifestyle change and not a diet. Following this program, I cannot go wrong.*
>
> *If you cannot control yourself when it comes to sweets – change it to something like: I am in control of what I am putting in my mouth. I am choosing to eat fruit instead.*
>
> *If you think your life is boring/too hard/has no meaning – you could change it to something like: Life is what I make of it – from today forward to will make it fun/easier/interesting….*

Once you change to positive thinking, you will feel better and your outcome will be very different.

Be aware: Every time a negative thought enters your mind – stop yourself and ask: Is this thought in my best interest? Is thinking this way going to get me to where I want to be?
And you can bet - any negative thoughts will work against you. Therefore it is very important to think positive. And as with everything in life, the more you practice, the easier it will get.

Being aware of how you think is the first step. Identifying your negative thought patterns and then changing them to positives will have a dramatic impact on the quality of your life.

I challenge you to work through this program – even if you are not an emotional eater. Anyone will profit from this exercise.

Good luck!

My current thinking	Positive thinking
My appearance:	
My body:	
My ability to manage my weight:	
My exercise level:	
My self-control:	
My life in general	