

Impulse or emotional eating

Sometimes we eat even though we're not really hungry—when our bodies don't actually need more food to function. This could be because eating satisfies needs other than nutrition. In fact we may use "comfort" food out of habit, to try to mask emotions or escape uncomfortable feelings. When you soothe those feelings with comfort food when you're not actually hungry, that's impulse or emotional eating.

Many people find that food helps calm them. This may be because it distracts them from their concerns, because they associate it with comfort, or because it actually alters brain chemistry.

Emotions can be the cause

We may eat when we're bored. We may eat when we're stressed out. Some people eat when they've been insulted; others when they're sad or lonely. Somewhere along the way, humans seem to have made a subliminal link between food and emotional fulfillment. So when we're in the grips of an emotion we can't seem to shake, sometimes eating—as much as a quart of ice cream or an entire bag of chips—helps muffle our feelings. But we almost always regret this behavior.

Habitual behavior can be the result

You see the candy dish full of jelly beans or nuts, so you help yourself, even if you don't feel hungry. The next thing you know, the dish is empty. A television commercial sends you to the kitchen for a little after-dinner snack, and gradually you feel as though something isn't quite

right unless you're munching chips while holding the remote.

In these cases, you've unwittingly taught yourself to expect and even want to eat when you don't really need to. We do this a lot: At the movies, for instance, we line up for popcorn and candy, even though we've probably just eaten dinner a little while ago. Forgotten in all these habitual behaviors is the realization that our bodies, if we'd only pay attention, tell us when to eat and when to stop.

The familiar comforts of food

Food makes us feel good—which isn't surprising. We're conditioned to associate food with comfort, warmth and safety. But food has its own attractions. It's tasty, it brings people together, and it keeps us alive and healthy. We enjoy, sometimes even revel in, food's taste, smell and texture. Eating helps distract us from problems—even significant ones. Think about what happens at a funeral: No matter how sincerely people mourn during the service, once the food is served, conversation revs up and people relax.

Food, in effect, provides us with an escape from our uncomfortable feelings. It is no surprise that stress can drive us to reach for food.

When emotional or behavioral needs kick in and we turn to food, we don't stop to wonder about how hungry we are, because we're being prompted by other influences. And if hunger isn't a factor to begin with, we're more likely to splurge, because the urge we're trying to satisfy has nothing to do with filling our stomachs, and everything to do with blocking our pain, or following a behavioral pattern. The aroma and sight of a chocolate fudge torte bathed in hot strawberry sauce only draws us further down the path toward splurging—something almost everyone does, and almost always regrets. Curiously, splurging can be a particular problem for those most concerned with monitoring their food. Someone who's dieting may get powerfully hungry and then make poor decisions about what to eat.

Strategies for overcoming emotional eating

Here are some tips for overcoming emotion-driven eating.

- **Pay attention to your internal cues.** When you're tempted to eat, stop and ask yourself if you're truly hungry. If not, what is causing you to think about eating? Perhaps your emotions are driving you. If that's the case, you can recondition yourself to turn to other activities besides eating.
- **Try drinking some water.** People often turn to food when they're really just thirsty. If you're not sure whether you are really hungry, drink a glass of water. If you're still hungry, eat something nutritious.
- **Assess your level of hunger.** When you have the urge to eat, ask yourself how hungry you are on a scale from 0 to 10. At 0, you're not hungry at all. At 3, you're satisfied. At 7, you're hungry, and at 10, famished. If you're tempted to eat even though you're not as high as a 3, try to make a smarter choice than relying on comfort food.
- **Take a break.** When you feel the urge to eat and have paused long enough to realize that you aren't really hungry, try to think of what, besides eating, you can do to satisfy your urge. Whether at the office or at home, try taking a one-minute break to help reduce your stress level and take the edge off your urge for food. Stand up and stretch, take a quick walk, do some deep breathing or muscle relaxation, or do whatever it takes to distract you and dispel your urge to eat.
- **Keep some healthy snacks handy.** If you decide that you're hungry, but it's not mealtime, have a snack limited to about 150 calories. This could be about 10 peanuts, 10 crackers or chips, a single large hard pretzel, a piece of fruit, or some carrots or celery sticks. With a healthy snack, you'll satisfy hunger while controlling calories.
- **Enjoy comfort in moderation.** Try dividing comfort foods into smaller portions. For instance, if you're set on having some chocolate cake, cut yourself a very thin piece and stop there. This way you're not denying yourself a treat; yet you're still in control.
- **Eat mindfully.** When you eat, don't distract yourself by also doing other activities such as using your smartphone, reading or watching TV. Eat slowly and savor every bite. If you make each meal a memorable event instead of an absentminded habit, you have a better chance of keeping track of how much you've eaten.

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