

Emotional Eating

Our emotional state and well-being have a direct effect on our eating habits. Whether we know it or not, many of us turn to food for comfort when we are feeling emotions such as stress, sadness or loneliness. Comfort foods often tend to be high in calories, fat and sugar. Being mindful about our emotions when we are eating can help us recognize eating patterns and identify steps to change them.

What is emotional eating?

Emotional eating is the practice of using food to make yourself feel better or fill emotional needs, rather than address hunger. You might turn to food when feeling sad or stressed out, or even as a reward. Emotional eating doesn't fix the underlying issue and can leave you feeling worse in the long run.

Emotional eating is often triggered by stress, strong emotions or trauma. Work stress, financial worries, health issues, childhood habits, social influences, or relationship struggles may be the root cause of emotional eating.

Table 1: Emotional Hunger vs Physical Hunger

Emotional Hunger	Physical Hunger
Comes on suddenly	Comes on gradually
Feels like it needs to be satisfied instantly	Feels like it can wait
Craves specific comfort foods	No specific food craving/open to options
Isn't satisfied with a full stomach	Stops when you're full
Can trigger feelings of guilt, powerlessness and shame	Typically, doesn't make you feel bad about yourself

Are you an emotional eater?

Answer the following questions to help identify if you may be engaging in emotional eating behaviors:

- 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 feel stuffed?
- Does food make you feel safe?
- Do you feel like food is a friend?
- Do you feel powerless or out of control around food?

Tips to curb emotional eating

- **Talk to a professional** such as a doctor, counselor or therapist to address the underlying reason for your emotional eating. Identifying the root cause of the emotional eating behavior is important to find healthy coping mechanisms for future situations that could trigger an emotional eating response.
 - ▶ To learn about counseling services in Texas, visit hhs.texas.gov and search for mental health counseling.
 - ▶ Call 2-1-1 or visit 211texas.org to find or connect to counseling services in your area.
- **Keep a food log** or diary of what you're eating and feeling to identify patterns in your behavior. If you can identify the emotional patterns behind your eating, you can start working to change them.
- **Eat a healthy breakfast** to encourage other healthy food decisions throughout the day. Try to avoid high sugar items such as sugary cereals and baked goods. Go for foods like oatmeal, hardboiled eggs, or smoothies made from fresh fruit.
- **Check your hunger.** Are you eating because you're hungry or because of something else like stress, sadness, boredom, etc.?
 - ▶ If you recently ate and your stomach isn't rumbling, you're probably not hungry. If you still feel the need to eat something, you probably want to eat for an emotional reason. In this case, drink some water instead and wait an hour before eating again to make sure you're eating because you are hungry. Sometimes our bodies can feel hungry when we are just thirsty.
- **Eat enough protein** to help you feel full longer. Eating food that assist in satisfying hunger for longer periods of time can help to minimize unhealthy eating patterns. Protein doesn't just come from meat – try beans and nuts as alternative sources.
- **Snack healthy.** Eat healthy snacks such as fruits and vegetables between meals to deflect off hunger while maintaining a healthy diet.
- **Don't deprive yourself.** Being mindful when eating is not about depriving yourself of the foods you love. Consider eating healthier options of these foods while recognizing the emotions you feel when eating them.

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