

What is emotional eating?

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.

The difference between emotional hunger and physical hunger

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

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:

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.

Stress – Ever notice how stress makes you hungry? It's not just in your mind. When stress is chronic, as it so often is in our chaotic, fast-paced world, your body produces 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, the more likely you are to turn to food for emotional relief.

Find other ways to feed your feelings

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. 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.

What is mindful eating?

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.

How to practice mindful eating

Eating while you're also doing other things—such as watching TV, driving, or playing with your phone—can prevent you from fully enjoying your food. Since your mind is elsewhere, you may not feel satisfied or continue eating even though you're no longer hungry. Eating more mindfully can help focus your mind on your food and the pleasure of a meal and curb overeating.

- Eat your meals in a calm place with no distractions, aside from any dining companions.
- Before you start to eat, take a moment to consider what it took to produce your meal, from the farmer to the grocer to the cook.

- Try eating with your non-dominant hand or using chopsticks instead of a knife and fork. Eating in such a non-familiar way can slow down how fast you eat and ensure your mind stays focused on your food.
- Allow yourself enough time not to have to rush your meal. Set a timer for 20 minutes and pace yourself so you spend at least that much time eating.
- Take small bites and chew them well, taking time to notice the different flavors and textures of each mouthful.
- Put your utensils down between bites. Take time to consider how you feel—hungry, satiated—before picking up your utensils again.
- Try to stop eating before you are full. It takes time for the signal to reach your brain that you've had enough. Don't feel obligated to always clean your plate.
- When you've finished your food, take a few moments to assess if you're really still hungry before opting for an extra serving or dessert.

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. This can enable you to rein in stress and repair emotional problems that often trigger emotional eating. HelpGuide's free [Emotional Intelligence Toolkit](#) can show you how.

Recommended reading

[Healthy Eating](#) – A guide to the new nutrition. (Harvard Medical School Special Health Report)

[10 Tips for Mindful Eating](#) – How mindfulness can help you fully enjoy a meal and the experience of eating—with moderation and restraint. (Harvard Health blog)

[Emotional Eating](#) – Aimed at teens, the difference between physical and emotional hunger, and how to break the cycle of emotional eating. (TeensHealth)

[Weight Loss: Gain Control of Emotional Eating](#) – Tips to regain control of your eating habits. (Mayo Clinic)

[Why Stress Causes People to Overeat](#) – Tips on controlling stress eating. (Harvard Health Publishing)

Mindful Eating Meditations –Free online mindfulness meditations. (The Center for Mindful Eating)

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