

Emotional Eating

Emotions and eating are intricately entwined. Each influences the other in ways we may not be aware of. Just think about the term “comfort food.” The notion that a particular food can soothe sadness or frustration highlights how interconnected feelings and food are.

Healthy diets foster good mood. Unhealthy diets, on the other hand, play a role in depressed mood. And the inverse is true too. When you feel good, you’re more likely to make good food choices. When you’re down on yourself, you’re less likely to make smart food choices. This is the idea behind “emotional eating.” At its best, emotional eating may entail binge eating, eating too little, or using unhealthy food to self-medicate. At its worst, it can result in eating disorders like bulimia or anorexia. Once you’re aware of how our emotions influence your dietary choices, you can learn techniques for untangling the food/feeling web and can make healthier choices about how you eat.

Your History With Food

We all have some level of emotional connection to food. It’s only a problem when it keeps us from making good food choices. If you find yourself unable to get a handle on food cravings, addictions, or destructive habits when it comes to food, your emotional eating is getting the better of you. It’s not hunger or your rational mind that is driving your eating. It’s most likely your emotions. Did your grandma have warm cookies waiting for you when you got home from school? That may factor into why you crave sweets when you need an emotional boost. Did your parents force you to stay at the table until you finished all your spinach? That could be why you have a hard time eating leafy greens, even though you know you they’re good for you.

Understanding the Root of Emotional Eating

With this understanding of your own personal history of emotional eating, there are ways that you can understand the root of your food choices. One of these ways is to learn to differentiate the difference between emotional hunger and physical hunger. Emotional hunger typically comes on quickly, feels urgent, and is often for something specific which you eat absent-mindedly, and doesn’t satisfy your hunger. Physical hunger, on the other hand, comes on slowly and can wait. It’s a hunger felt in the stomach that will be satisfied by a variety of foods, enabling you to make healthy food choices. If you realize you’re feeling emotional, not physical, hunger, stop and take a deep breath. Do something else instead of eating. Go for a walk, call a friend, do a few jumping jacks. Just disrupt the flow before you start emotionally eating.

Emotional eating is a dynamic cycle. It stems from a well of feelings, and it creates more feelings. A more accurate understanding of emotions can help you gain control of them. When uncovering the link between our emotions and our eating, it helps to be as specific as possible. For some people, understanding this connection is enough to interrupt it. For others, deeper work with an integrative health practitioner may be necessary. But either way, getting to the root of your feelings about food can help you transform your eating habits.