Emotional Eating

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Concept of Emotional Eating

Emotional eating is defined as the "propensity to eat in response to positive and negative emotions".

-While the term "emotional eating" often refers to eating as a means of coping with negative emotions, it also includes eating for positive emotions such as eating foods when celebrating an event or eating to enhance an already good mood.

-In these situations, <u>emotions are still driving the eating</u> but not in a negative way.

-Emotional eating includes eating in response to any emotion, whether that be positive or negative.

-Most frequently, people refer to emotional eating as "eating to cope with negative emotions." In these situations, emotional eating can be considered a form of disordered eating which is defined as "an increase in food intake in response to negative emotions" and can be considered a maladaptive strategy.

-More specifically, emotional eating in order to relieve negative emotions would qualify as a form of emotion-focused coping, which attempts to minimize, regulate, and prevent emotional distress.

Does emotional eating reduce emotional distress?

-A scientific study found that emotional eating sometimes does not reduce emotional distress but instead enhances emotional distress by sparking feelings of intense guilt after an emotional eating session.

-Those that eat as a coping strategy are at an especially high risk of developing binge-eating disorder, and those with eating disorders are at a higher risk to engage in emotional eating as a means to cope.

Common signs of emotional eating are:

-Changing your eating habits when you have more stress in your life.

-Eating when you are not hungry or when you are full.

-Eating to avoid dealing with a stressful situation.

-Eating to soothe your feelings.

-You seek solace in food

-Using food as a reward

-We don't always eat just to satisfy physical hunger. Many of us also turn to food for comfort, stress relief, or to reward ourselves.

-And when we do, we tend to reach for junk food, sweets, and other comforting but unhealthy foods.

-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.

-Emotional eating is using food to make yourself feel better—to fill emotional needs, rather than your stomach. Unfortunately, emotional eating doesn't fix emotional problems. In fact, it usually makes you feel worse.

-Afterward, not only does the original emotional issue remain, but you also feel guilty for overeating.

The emotional eating cycle

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.

The emotional eating cycle

The Emotional Eating Cycle

You feel guilty and powerless over food

Something happens that upsets you

You feel an overwhelming urge to eat

You eat more than you know you should

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. You beat yourself for messing up and not having more willpower.

The difference between emotional hunger and physical hunger

-Before you can break free from the cycle of emotional eating, you first need to learn how to distinguish between emotional and physical hunger. This can be trickier than it sounds, especially if you regularly use food to deal with your feelings.

-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 vs. Physical hunger

Emotional hunger comes on suddenly

Physical hunger comes on gradually

Emotional hunger feels like it needs to be satisfied instantly

Physical hunger can wait

Emotional hunger craves specific comfort foods

Physical hunger is open to options—lots of things sound good

Emotional hunger vs. Physical hunger

Emotional hunger isn't satisfied with a full stomach

Physical hunger stops when you're full

Emotional eating triggers feelings of guilt, powerlessness, and shame

Eating to satisfy physical hunger doesn't make you feel bad about yourself

Identify your emotional eating triggers

-The first step in putting a stop to emotional eating is identifying your personal 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

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.

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.

Keep an emotional eating diary

You probably recognized yourself in at least a few of the previous descriptions. But even so, you'll want to get even more specific. One of the best ways to identify the patterns behind your emotional eating is to keep track with a food and mood diary.

Every time you overeat or feel compelled to reach for your version of comfort food Kryptonite, take a moment to figure out what triggered the urge. If you backtrack, you'll usually find an upsetting event that kicked off the emotional eating cycle. Write it all down in your food and mood diary: what you ate (or wanted to eat), what happened to upset you, how you felt before you ate, what you felt as you were eating, and how you felt afterward.

Over time, you'll see a pattern emerge. Maybe you always end up gorging yourself after spending time with a critical friend. Or perhaps you stress eat whenever you're on a deadline or when you attend family functions. Once you identify your emotional eating triggers, the next step is identifying healthier ways to feed your feelings.

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.

Alternatives to emotional eating

If you're depressed or lonely, call someone who always makes you feel better, play with your dog or cat, or look at a favorite photo or cherished memento.

If you're anxious, expend your nervous energy by dancing to your favorite song, squeezing a stress ball, or taking a brisk walk.

If you're exhausted, treat yourself with a hot cup of tea, take a bath, light some scented candles, or wrap yourself in a warm blanket.

If you're bored, read a good book, watch a comedy show, explore the outdoors, or turn to an activity you enjoy (woodworking, playing the guitar, shooting hoops, scrapbooking, etc.).

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.

Support yourself with healthy lifestyle habits

Make daily exercise a priority. Physical activity does wonders for your mood and energy levels, and it's also a powerful stress reducer. And getting into the exercise habit is easier than you may think.

Aim for 8 hours of sleep every night. When you don't get the sleep you need, your body craves sugary foods that will give you a quick energy boost. Getting plenty of rest will help with appetite control and reduce food cravings.

Make time for relaxation. Give yourself permission to take at least 30 minutes every day to relax, decompress, and unwind. This is your time to take a break from your responsibilities and recharge your batteries.

Connect with others. Don't underestimate the importance of close relationships and social activities. Spending time with positive people who enhance your life will help protect you from the negative effects of stress.

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.