



Stopping Emotional Eating

Do you consider yourself to be an emotional eater? This is a much overused phrase, though realistically fits for so many of us who have struggled with losing weight or maintaining our success once we have lost weight. There are many approaches to dealing with emotional eating, so this will cover some ways you can begin to address it now.

Emotional eating can have many origins for people, most that began in our early years, and sometimes patterns we have developed more in recent years. Let's look at two general motivators for why people turn to emotional eating.

Seeking escape or soothing of emotional discomfort: Most examples of self-reported emotional eating are done in order to leave a state of emotional discomfort. Whatever the uncomfortable emotion is--fear, sadness, anger, anxiety, boredom, loneliness, confusion, and even excitement, many of us have learned that it can be avoided or evaded by eating. So we eat in the quest to feel better. By putting food or beverages in our mouths, we can "stuff" down uncomfortable feelings and create a momentary positive response. After all, eating can soothe us by activating our "feel-good" centers in the brain. And this is especially true of super palatable food, particularly processed foods and those containing sugar (even fruit).

Emotional connections to food that you relate to a positive experience: We often associate certain foods with loved ones or positive memories that involved consuming a particular food, dish, or meal. As we seek to recapture these positive feelings of joy, love, safety, nostalgia, etc., we return to the specific food. Unfortunately, it is rather uncommon for most of us to struggle with feeling emotionally pulled to eat broccoli. The foods we tend to be drawn to are typically highly processed and/or contain sugar.

One of the first steps in changing a pattern of emotional eating is to slow down the automatic, typically unconscious process and allow yourself to be mindful. Interrupting emotional eating by first becoming conscious of the decision-making process involved in choosing to eat is an important part of changing the behavior.

Oftentimes people who are eating emotionally are not even aware that they are using a faulty decision-making process. Unfortunately, for many, it feels like the drive or need to consume desired foods is beyond their control or ability to manage differently. Sometimes they have come to use eating as their primary approach to managing emotions (often not even consciously) and to believe that it is their only way to feel better. In reality, they have already set into motion the belief that having a particular food experience is going to ease their discomfort. They place so much value on the anticipated sense of relief or reward that they believe will result from eating, that it feels like a necessary behavior rather than just one option.

The next step in a mindful decision about eating is to observe what feelings are present or anticipated. This then allows you to identify the underlying needs. So for example, paying attention to the current feelings of fear when wanting to eat a bag of cookies may help you recognize that gaining a sense of security is what is actually needed.

And now that the underlying feeling has been identified, you can assess whether eating will actually address the emotional need vs a temporary numbing of the feeling. Recognizing that the cookies will only block the sense of fear for a short time and fall short of addressing the actual need for a sense of security, allows you to then further generate solutions.

Of course this process of becoming aware of your needs and the decision-making process you use around emotional eating is one that will require practice and patience. The benefits of challenging yourself to slow down and think through the decision can significantly reduce the guilt or negative self-assessment that follows emotional eating, as well as help you make more consistent progress in your health and weight goals. The following steps will be useful in interrupting your current emotional eating patterns and finding more successful ways to meet your needs vs turning to problematic food choices.

Steps to stop emotional eating:

1. Recognize that you are entering into making a decision about whether to eat and what to eat.
2. Ask what feeling or need is motivating you to want to eat.
3. Observe what feelings are present in your body. Where is there tension?
4. Weigh out the imagined result of eating this food. How do you imagine feeling while you eat it? Fifteen minutes after you eat it? An hour later? Tomorrow?

5. Assess whether the anticipated result of eating this food actually addresses the feeling or need that you want to resolve.
6. If not, rather than eating, take the opportunity to further explore how you can address the underlying need without interfering with your health/weight goals.

It won't take long before you are able to flow through these steps more naturally, but first you will have to make this pattern familiar to you and make mindlessly resorting to eating unfamiliar by engaging other options.

This approach to interrupting emotional eating requires you to focus not just on the logic of whether eating this food will help you reach your health/weight goals, but specifically on how you want to feel not just in this moment and how you will feel after this eating choice. Wanting the discomfort to actually be soothed or resolved rather than masked and avoided, can help lead you to take other action as you honestly identify that this food choice will not only not actually achieve this goal but will likely add additional tension or discomfort, physically or emotionally afterward.

This is also true if what is motivating you to want a specific food or to eat emotionally is a positive emotional connection you have to that food. Taking the time to slow down the decision, and to explore what attracts you to this food. Does it bring up emotions about a person or memories that provide you some comforting or enjoyable feelings. Again, take the time to identify what feeling you may be wanting to replace with these "feel good" feelings, or perhaps you are just seeing the positive feeling you associate with this food. Either way, you can then explore what else would help you achieve the feeling you want. If a particular food item reminds you of spending time with your family and feeling loved, what other ways can you access this positive feeling? Can you remember times and how good you felt? Can you connect with that person or memory in a different way than eating that food item? By reminding yourself that the memories and feelings connected to the person or events are not stored in foods but within you, you can work to take away the power this food has to elicit problematic eating.

Again, the key to stopping emotional eating is to slow down the decision-making process. This will help you become aware of emotional motivations and give yourself time to access other ways to be with your feelings and tap into more comfortable feeling states without harming yourself or derailing your efforts for your health and weight goals.