

## Lesson 12: Emotional Eating

Hi, everybody. Welcome to Lesson 12: Emotional Eating. Today, we're going to look into how we develop emotional eating patterns and some ways we can interrupt these patterns and address our underlying needs instead. Emotional eating is a significant and popular topic in our community. It's one that I really enjoy, but it's also a difficult one. It may feel daunting for most of us because we started it at a very young age, and we've been fine-tuning this skill for many years. It's a topic we chose for this masterclass because it's something that almost everyone struggles with to some degree. Most of us have learned to connect eating with emotional management or feeling good or even avoiding discomfort from the time of infancy. You're not flawed or broken or damaged if you eat emotionally, but there are things that you can learn about how to interrupt that pattern and change it so that it doesn't set you back in your goals for your health and your weight loss.

Now, in lesson two, I talked about our paradigm shifting, mindset, limiting beliefs, self-talk, and self-compassion, and I did that for a reason. These concepts all play a role in emotional eating and how to change that pattern. So your mindset and how you identify yourself, what you're saying to your brain and what limiting beliefs you hold around your emotional eating are all important to examine. Some people come to us at TFM and say, "I know what my problem is, I'm an emotional eater." They take this behavior pattern or habit as an identity or who they are. And again, for our brain, that makes it very hard to change the behavior because the message is telling yourself that it's a part of who you are. That's not really true. You aren't an emotional eater just because you have learned to eat in response to your emotions. Just like you aren't a walker just because you can walk.

First I invite you to think about how you're using that phrase, "emotional eating". Stop identifying it as who you are and how you do life versus it's a habit that you have. It's a habit that you can change, then, because habits can be learned and habits can be unlearned as we already discussed. You might also have some limiting beliefs about this, and you might not be aware of what they are. For example, some people have learned, again since the time of infancy or toddlerhood or young childhood, that the way I handle difficult emotions is by eating. This is especially true of problematic foods, foods that we may have had access to as a kid. Easy things to get usually aren't the healthiest things. And let's face it, I rarely hear anyone say, "I'm such an emotional eater. Yesterday, I couldn't stop eating salmon." or "I'm just so upset, I just want some more broccoli."

What we learn to eat when we're eating tied to emotions are things that bring us some relief, some pleasure, some joy so that we can escape that moment of that uncomfortable feeling. When you were an infant, you learned to bond through eating, and you learned that when you were uncomfortable, say you were hungry or you were fussy, someone gave you food and it calmed you down. It was reinforced right from the beginning and no one did anything wrong to set that up. That's how it works. What many of us learned from that point forward was a pattern of using food in a more problematic way, to use it more frequently than necessary, and to use it with more, highly palatable food than just eating for nourishment.

You may have been someone as a young child who, if adults in your life were really busy, they gave you access to food, or maybe they were not very present for you and you had to find food for yourself, either in the house or going somewhere that you could buy food. Again, most young children don't know a lot about nutrition, and so you bought what was easy, what sounded good, and what tasted good. Many of our emotional eating habits started when we were young. And then we continued to develop them as we grew older, into our teenage years, where we got some more freedom and autonomy as far as what food we would eat into our young adulthood. Maybe you went to college or you got married, or you went out on your own and started earning your own income. You could buy whatever food whenever you wanted. And this is how our habits around emotional eating kept growing. Many of us did not learn effective ways to manage our emotions while growing up.

And I want to be very clear about this, I'm not blaming anyone. We may have had caretakers when we were children who were negligent, who were abusive, or who were very loving and present. It doesn't matter actually as far as emotional eating goes, because it's a pattern developed in all types of environments and families. We learned certain messages from the adults in our lives. If we had adults in our lives who were able to respond well to our emotions, they heard them, understood them, gave space for them, and affirmed them, we probably learned some healthy ways to respond to our emotions. But many of us did not. Our parents or grandparents or whoever was raising us were busy. They had stressors that they were trying to figure out how to deal with. And many, despite the best intentions, may not have known very much about how to manage the emotional development of young kids, and so they did the very best they could.

But oftentimes we learned really mixed messages about our emotions. We learned that some emotions are not safe to express. For example, maybe it's not safe to be angry. You get in trouble when you say something out of an angry tone. We may have learned that crying or being upset was not tolerated or caused other people discomfort. I still remember a day when my brother told my niece, "Stop crying, or I'll give you something to cry about." That hurt my heart because I saw that message she was getting about her emotions at a very young age. So again, I'm not blaming the people who raised us, that is the most complicated job on earth, but oftentimes we learn some things in the process that don't serve us very well now in our adulthood, and we can relearn these things.

So that's the base. Oftentimes, we've learned that we get an escape or a soothing or a numbing of uncomfortable feelings, things that we don't really know what to do with that cause tension in our body. They make us anxious or nervous or fidgety or give us a pit in our stomach or tightness in our body. And of course, our brain wants to escape these uncomfortable feelings. If you remember that primitive part of the brain I talked about that looks like this, that part senses these things and wants to get out of it immediately. This is nothing pathological about any of us, that is normal, but it leads us to behaviors that then cause us difficulties. So let's look at how we can change these behaviors.

For most of us, emotional eating is an automatic response. Tension rises up somewhere in us, and sometimes we're not even aware that's what's happening. We find ourselves standing at the refrigerator, in front of the cupboard. We are numbing ourselves. We're intervening so that we don't have to experience whatever discomfort is. For many of us, we're not even aware that this is actually happening. We just think, "We need some food." or "We need a snack." or "We're just doing what comes naturally." The first step in addressing emotional eating is to work on slowing down that process. That primitive part of the brain that I described in lesson seven, it contains the amygdala, gets activated and wants to seek relief right away. And it's not engaging the part of your brain that will help you make sense of it.

When we're coming from an emotional response, we probably are not yet engaging our prefrontal cortex. Remember, that's the computer mastermind of handling things. So we go to the refrigerator, we start eating a snack food, we feel a little bit of relief, and then we can move on. So we've numbed or escaped the tension. We've gotten our relief. So it's really important to start working on is slowing that process down so that we go from not only being reactive to the emotion but in starting to activate our thinking mind so that we can think about our next step, a better approach or another option. In order to help you with this, it will be helpful to eliminate or minimize the problematic food you have in your home and have access to it at work, in your car, et cetera. The more problematic food I have in my house, the more likely I'm going to continue eating emotionally. I'll quickly go to get that food. If I have that easy access to that food, that routine gets reinforced over and over and is even harder to break.

If I don't have access to that highly palatable, problematic food, I'm slowing down the process a little bit. But for some emotional eating would be anything that's available. So creating some barriers, creating some ways to slow yourself down when you're feeling driven to eat even though it's not a time that you are planning to eat. Let's say, for example, I have to walk around a tall counter to get into my kitchen. Something I could do each time I enter my kitchen is to slow myself down by putting my hand on the edge of the counter and pausing. Just giving myself a moment to think about why I'm there. None of this internal processing should come from a shaming or blaming perspective. It's natural that I find myself going to the kitchen when I'm having an emotional response. I've been doing that for 20, 30, or 40 years.

So what I want to do is I want to slow it down. Put my hand on that counter, stop, and pause. Now I can think about what's actually happening. Part of my brain is telling me, "You have to go get that snack food." But if I pause, I may be able to activate the other part of my brain that says, "No, that's not the right step right now." So by pausing, I'm slowing it down, I'm giving myself time to activate my thinking brain, not just responding to my emotional brain. Then the next step is to think about why am I seeking this food? What's my experience that is leading me to this? So I might say, "I'm feeling nervous. I'm jittery." Okay, great, that's good to know. So this rational part of us can observe that and say, "Yeah, you're feeling jittery. You just got off a really difficult meeting, and you're irritated. I understand that." So it can listen to you and see what the actual need is.

The need is never for the junk food or the snack. The need is to have some relief from an uncomfortable emotional response. But if we don't pause, we can't figure out what that need is. And then we don't have an opportunity to address it. As I pause, I can think about what I'm

experiencing. I'm angry. I'm really frustrated. I feel stuck and trapped, and I want food. This is so important because now my more rational brain can say, "I understand that. We're not going to eat that food right now because that's going to interfere with the goal of this fast or that's going to interfere with the goal of eating healthy food and losing weight or improving blood sugar." So how else can we address this need? Do you feel frustrated? How can we help feel less frustrated? That primitive part of the brain doesn't care about the consequences, it just wants the relief. So by activating the other part of the brain, we can slow that down and help us find the other options.

Something I want to encourage everyone to do, it's simple, use a note card or a blank notes page in your phone or on your laptop, but I'd like you to write out something that says, "When I feel blank, I want to eat blank." or "I most want to eat when I feel blank." Then below that, I'd like you to write down some statements that you need to hear at that time like, "I have other options besides eating this food. I can handle the emotional reaction I'm having. There are many ways to feel better right now." The goal is to give yourself these statements, practice changing the thoughts that you're having, because part of your thought process that's happening at that moment is, "I have to have this to stop feeling this way." And you want to replace that. You want to tell yourself that you have other options.

If you were to watch someone else play this out, you know that it's not true that they have to have that food to feel better. But at that moment, your brain isn't engaging in that way. So having a card written out, going through this thought process, reading through it, "When I feel angry, I have options of how to manage that emotion." rather than, "When I feel angry, I have to eat dessert." You have options. You have steps you can take. Now at first, as you start practicing this, you might stand in the kitchen, pause and say, "I'm going to eat it anyway." I understand that. Even doing the pausing is changing the response pattern that you've been doing over and over for many years. Slowly over time you may make different decisions.

So today, you start practicing this and you come back and you say, "Terry, I don't know what to do. I thought about it, and I still ate the problematic food." Please don't judge yourself harshly. You're changing a habit, a habit of thought, a habit of how to handle difficult things in a way that you've been doing for years and years. It's not going to change overnight, and that's okay. The important thing is that you're making steps to interrupt the old pattern and to start a new pattern. You're aligning with yourself to say, "I know you're having this emotion, and that's okay. But we're not going to eat something problematic to deal with this emotion." That's the key to changing this habit now.

You may likely find that this process is not as simple as, "What I'm feeling is this, and what I can do about it is this." Many of us have learned to ignore our feelings. We learned that our feelings are not safe. They get us in trouble with other people. They cause other people to respond in ways that feel unsafe for us. We have them turned on us by other people. It's better just to stuff them down and not share them, not to recognize them. And then for some of us, even if we know what the feeling is and the need is, we don't believe that it's okay to do something about it. And the one thing we know to do about it is to eat because that doesn't really affect other people. It only negatively affects us. It brings us relief in that moment, very briefly, and then



brings guilt, shame, more weight, higher glucose, whatever the negative consequences are for us.

Part of changing your emotional eating pattern is to become more aware of what you are experiencing and feeling, and then decide healthy ways to address these. So many of us live a lot of our lives up here, in our heads, kind of disconnected from everything that's going on down here that tells us how we're actually feeling. So we go into thinking mode. And this process isn't really about thinking mode, it's about feeling mode, but we're disconnected from that. And so what we learn to do is to dress it with this behavior of eating, especially problematic food.

An important skill to build here is a nurturing inner voice. You may remember I talked about self-compassion and a self-coach in lesson two. We're going to work on using that skill to help with this emotional eating challenge so that a few months from now you no longer identify yourself as an emotional eater. If you're having uncomfortable emotions, you can use eating as a means to try to escape it, but I think as you keep practicing this, you'll see that that habit becomes less and less effective as you're developing other habits of how to respond to your needs, how to recognize what you're feeling, recognize what your needs are, and then to address them specifically.

Your nurturing inner voice is that self-coach. The self-coach acknowledges your struggle and also uses resources and offers support. It joins you in your struggle, sits beside you, and acknowledges your experience, and it helps you generate better ways to address your needs rather than eating. None of us actually ever have a need for a muffin, but when we're feeling upset, lonely, hurt, rejected, angry, scared, what we may think is, "I have to have this muffin. This is going to make me feel better." That's the faulty thinking we want to chip away at and help you recognize, "I'm having thoughts and feelings. I probably hold some limiting beliefs about this, and I see eating this food as the best way to approach it." And what you know is these things bring you a lot of negative consequences. So, strengthening your nurturing inner voice or self-coach so that you can be safe in acknowledging your emotional needs will make a significant difference in addressing emotional eating patterns.

From today's lesson, I encourage you to get started with slowing down the process. If you are someone who can recognize your feelings, experiences, and needs, start working through that. When you are drawn to eating that muffin, start recognizing, "Ah, I'm lonely. Okay, well having that muffin actually isn't going to help me feel less lonely. What would? Maybe I could reach out to a friend or maybe I could join a meetup group and go hang out with some new people." We have options to deal with these feelings. Those feelings are telling us something important, and stuffing them down with food never meets the actual need. It never addresses the root cause.

The action points from today's lesson are number one, reflect on when you are most susceptible to using emotional eating. What are the situations when you find yourself emotionally eating most often? Which feelings are the biggest triggers? And then number two, create a list of options to address your key trigger emotions when you most want to eat and what inner dialogue you could use to talk yourself through this. To help support you while trying to implement these action steps, try joining our healthy habits challenge this week, or join our



healthy habits check-in, which meets on Wednesday. Don't forget to register for the next masterclass Q&A where we answer your questions. And all of these sessions are listed in your course syllabus, and make sure to check this out regularly so that you don't miss any events. Also, I hope that you're dropping in to say hi and let us know how things are going for you in the exclusive forum thread for this masterclass. This is our goal for next week, we want to encourage you to start fasting on your eating days. Have a great weekend, everybody. Take good care. Bye-bye.