



Lesson 7: Emotional Eating

Hi, everybody. Welcome to day seven of the Healthy Mindset Masterclass. We are halfway there. I hope that this week has been full of some insights for you, some time to reflect, and start practicing some new skills, some new ways to think and some new behaviors.

Today's topic is Emotional Eating, and this is such a big topic. It's one that I really enjoy, but it's also a difficult one. It's so big for most of us because we started it at a very young age and we've been working on this skill for decades. So because this is such a big topic to cover here in one day of the masterclass, I made it into our weekly healthy habit challenge in the community so you can access it there. Let me show you where to find that.

This is I'm under Categories on the app, and I'm going to click on Group Challenges. And when that opens, I will see both the Group Fasting Challenges that Megan and Jason Fung do videos for. And next to that, you'll see the Healthy Habits Challenges. So if I open that, I will get this week's Current Habit Challenge. I'll get Upcoming Habit Challenges just to let me know what's coming. And the Previous Habit Challenges that I can go back and watch it in these videos. So if I click on Current Habit Challenge, I will get this week's videos. They're released on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. So, you'll have three videos throughout the week.

So let's talk about emotional eating. Now, one of the reasons this is such a big topic for this masterclass is because it's something that almost everyone struggles with. We learn to connect eating with emotional management or feeling good from the time of infancy. So 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 or your weight loss.

Now, earlier this past week, I've been talking about our paradigm shifting, been talking about mindset and limiting beliefs. And I did that for a reason. I built on these things because this week we're going to talk about some of these skills more in depth. And one of the big ones with emotional eating is how you identify yourself, what you're saying to your brain, and what limiting beliefs that you hold around this. Some people come to us and say, "I know what my problem is. I'm an emotional eater." So we take this identity as I am this behavior. And again, for our brain, that makes it very hard to change the behavior because

it's who you are from what you're telling yourself. It's not really true. You aren't any emotional eater, just like you aren't a walker just because you walk.

So what I want you to start doing is think about how you're using the phrase even. Stop identifying it as just 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. So you might also have some limiting beliefs about this, and you might not be aware of what they are. So for example, some people have learned, again since the time of infancy or toddlerhood or young childhood, the way that 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 never hear anyone say, "I'm such an emotional eater. Yesterday I couldn't stop eating salmon" or "I'm just so upset. I want more broccoli." I never hear that.

What we learn to eat when we're eating tied to emotion are things that bring us some relief, some pleasure, some joy so that we can escape that moment of that feeling. When you were an infant, you learn to bond around eating and you learned that you were uncomfortable, you were hungry, you were fussy. And then 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. Many of us learned from that point forward is to use it in a more problematic way, use it more frequently than necessary and use it with more highly palatable foods than just eating.

So 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 really not very present and you had to find food yourself, either in the house or going to a small store where you could buy things. 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.

So many of our emotional eating habits started when we were young. And then we continue to develop them as we grow older into our teenage years, where we get some more freedom as far as what food we eat into our young adulthood, you went to college, or if you got married or 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 keep growing.

Now, I want to be really clear about the next piece I'm going to talk about. Most of us have not learned effective ways to manage our emotions. 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. It doesn't matter actually. We learn certain messages from them. So if we had adults in our lives who were able to respond well to our emotions, heard them, understood them, gave space for them and affirmed them, we probably learned healthy ways to respond to our emotions. But many of us did not. Our

parents or grandparents or whoever was raising us, they were busy. They had stressors that they were trying to figure out how to deal with. They didn't know very much about how to manage the emotional development of 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 what message she was getting about her emotions at a very young age. So again, I am not blaming the people who raised us. That is the most complicated job on earth, but oftentimes we learned some things in that 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, they cause tension in our body. They make us anxious or nervous or fidgety or pit in our stomach or tightness in our stomach. And of course our brain wants to escape these uncomfortable feelings. Again, that is nothing pathological about any of us. That is normal, but it leads us to behaviors that then cause us difficulties. Let's look at how can we 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 it's happening. And we find ourselves standing at the refrigerator or in front of the cupboard. We're numbing ourselves. We are intervening so that we don't have to experience whatever that discomfort is. And as I said, 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. Part of your brain is getting 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. 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. What's really important to start working on is slowing that process down so that we can go from only being reactive to the emotion and starting to activate our thinking mind so that we can think about our next step, a better approach, another option.

The more problematic food I have in my house, the more likely I'm going to continue to eat emotionally. I will quickly go to get that food. I have easy access and that routine gets

reinforced over and over. 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. Let's say for example, I have to walk around my tall counter to get into my kitchen. Something I could do to just slow myself down as each time I walk into the kitchen, I put my hand on the edge of the counter and pause. 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. Been doing that for 20, 30, 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 this snack food." But if I pause, I may be able to activate that other part of my brain that says, "No, that's not the right step right now." Now in this week's healthy habits challenge that I mentioned, I'm going to talk in more detail about those parts of the brain and how they're interacting. 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. 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. You're irritated. I understand that." So it can listen to and see what the actual need is. The need never is 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.

So as I pause, I can think about what am I 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? 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 this other part of our brain, we can slow that down and help us find other options.

Something I want to encourage everyone to do and it's simple. Use a note card or use a blank notes thing in your phone or on your laptop. But I'd like for you to write out something that says, "When I feel _____, I want to eat _____. I most want to eat when I feel _____." 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." Giving yourself these statements, changing the thoughts, because part of your thought process that's happening at that moment is "I have to have this to stop feeling this."

When we look at it, if you were to watch someone else do this, you know that that's not true, but in that moment, your brain isn't engaging in that way. So having a card written out, going through this thought process, 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. Slowly over time, you may make a different decision.

So if today you start practicing this and you come back and you say, "Terri, 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 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 right now.

As I described earlier and showed you on my app in the Healthy Habits Challenge this week, I'm going to go into more detail about ways you can build that up because for most of us who are struggling with this, it's not as simple as, hmm, what am I feeling and what could I do about it? We for many years 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 are unsafe for us. We get them turned on us. 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.

So the reason I'm going into more detail about this in the community is because many of us have never learned to recognize our feelings and our needs. We don't even know really what's going on. We live a lot of our life up here in our head, 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 about thinking mode. It's about feeling mode, but we're disconnected from that. And so what we learned to do is to address it with this behavior of eating, especially eating problematic food.

So I'm going to take you into a little more detail about how to build this nurturing voice. You may remember I talked about self-compassion and a self-coach. 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. It's an option. 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 my needs, how to recognize what I'm feeling, recognize what I'm needing, and then address it specifically.

None of us ever actually 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 kind of 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 that brings you a lot of negative consequences. So, I'm going to help you break that habit down.

But from today's lesson, I encourage you to just get started with slowing down the process. If you are someone who can recognize your feelings, experiences, and needs, start working through that. Start recognizing actually I'm lonely. Okay, well having that muffin actually isn't going to help me not feel lonely. It's not going to help me feel less lonely. What would? Maybe I could reach out to a friend. Maybe I could join a meetup group and go hang out with some new people. We have options to deal with those 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.

So I hope that you're willing to take a look at this today. I hope that you will hop into the community. Those lessons come out on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. So it's something you can be looking at all of this week and you will have access to it during your month of membership and you'll have access to this beyond that. So I look forward to talking to you again tomorrow. Over the next few days, we're going to get into some other heavy topics and some topics that really relate to everything that we've been building towards so far. Take good care, everybody.