

Emotional Eating

The difference between emotional eating and overeating

Most people eat too much sometimes. For example, many people eat more than they normally would at Thanksgiving. It's not healthy, but it isn't emotional eating.

Sometimes people have poor eating habits. They eat too many RED foods. They eat portions that are too large. They drink a lot of soda. It's not healthy, but it isn't emotional eating.

Emotional eating is using food to deal with strong emotions. Sometimes it is called "stress eating." Sometimes when you are angry, scared, stressed, excited, or even bored, you eat. People think that eating will comfort them. Often people don't even realize they are doing emotional or stress eating.

Emotional eating is eating when you feel stress. It's using food to deal with emotions.

How to tell if you are doing stress eating

There are two parts to stress eating:

- ▶ You eat to deal with emotions.
- ▶ You eat when you are not hungry.

There may be other clues that you are doing some stress eating:

- ▶ Turning to food right after being upset.
- ▶ Shutting down when something bad happens. Feelings that don't get talked about cause more stress. This can lead to many bad things, including stress eating.
- ▶ Eating too much food. Are you eating much more than most people would eat in the same situation? Eating too much means more than snacking on a brownie. It's finishing off 4 brownies at a time.
- ▶ Eating in secret. Would you

KEY GOALS

Understanding emotional eating will help you meet your 4 key goals:

- ⊙ Limit RED foods
- ⊙ Increase GREEN activity
- ⊙ Hold Family Meetings
- ⊙ Keep Track of Weight

be embarrassed if anyone saw you eating so much?

- ▶ Eating too fast without taking time to enjoy it.



Here's what you'll learn about in this module:

- ▶ Recognizing emotional or stress eating habits
- ▶ Protecting yourself from stress eating
- ▶ What to do if you are stress eating



- ▶ Eating until you feel uncomfortable and stuffed.
- ▶ Feeling out of control with your eating. Do you feel an urge to eat that you can't control? Do feel that you can't stop once you start?
- ▶ Feeling bad about yourself after eating.

If you are doing some of these things, you may be doing stress eating. It's worth looking into. The Help Sheet, your parents, and your PAL can help you figure it out.

What's wrong with eating to feel better?

In the end, it never works. You might feel better while you're eating. But you need to deal with whatever caused the feeling in the first place. Eating chocolate cake isn't going to change your grade in math class. It isn't going to help you get back on track with a friend after an argument. In fact, this kind of eating usually leaves you feeling worse about yourself. You didn't deal with the situation causing you to feel upset. You also



went against your plan to eat healthy.



If you want to get control of your stress

eating, look closely at the rest of your day. How did you feel? What were your eating habits?

To learn to deal with stress eating, you need to figure out what caused you to do it. This means looking at what happened to you during the day. Pay special attention to upsetting feelings, getting too hungry, and negative thinking.

- ▶ Upsetting feelings—like sadness, anger, stress, discouragement, loneliness, disappointment, or even excitement—can trigger stress eating. It's a way of trying to deal with these feelings. That's why one of the first things you need to do is ask yourself: *What feelings might have triggered my eating? What put stress on me? When? What did I feel? How did I react?*
- ▶ Hunger can also cause stress eating. Being too hungry causes stress. Sometimes a person who is trying really hard to lose weight will skip meals during the day. She might skip breakfast and hardly eat anything at lunch. "It

Stress eating often leads to weight gain. That's exactly what you are trying not to do.

will help me lose weight faster," she thinks. By the end of the day, her hunger is out of control. So, when she does eat, her eating is also out of control. Feeling guilty makes her determined to eat even less the next day. Of course, that doesn't work either, and the cycle goes on.

That's why it's important to look at your eating habits during the day. You may be eating healthy foods that you really don't like. And so it might seem as if you've been depriving yourself. That's why it's important to plan healthy meals and snacks *that you like*. In fact, it's better to eat a small portion of a RED food that you like during the day than to fill up on RED foods at the end of the day.

- ▶ Negative thinking can cause stress eating. "I ate too many RED foods again today. I'll *never* lose weight. I may as well give up and just eat what I want." This kind of Always/Never thought makes it easy to give in to stress eating.

Alicia had fallen into the habit of skipping her breakfast. She thought it would help her lose weight faster.

One day she had almost no time to eat lunch. She had stayed after class to talk to her teacher about her history test. She was very upset with herself for doing poorly. When she saw that the cafeteria was closing, she said to herself, "That's OK. I don't need lunch. It will just help me lose more weight."

But she still felt upset about the test. She had planned to get some physical activity after school, but she was feeling too depressed to do that. Instead, she decided to watch some television and have a snack. "I've had a tough day, and I'm hungry. I can't wait till dinner," she said to herself. "Besides, I'm tired of always trying to do the right things."

She found a fresh bag of cookies and started in. By the time her television program was over, she discovered that she had eaten the whole bag of cookies. She felt guilty right away. She was also ashamed of herself. She decided to hide the empty bag at the bottom of the trashcan. "That way no one will know," she told herself.

She also decided not to put it on her Lifestyle Log. "My parents and my PAL would be really upset with me if they knew what I did," she thought.

Later her mother asked her about the missing bag of cookies. Alicia said that she didn't know anything about it. She felt too ashamed to tell the truth.

Then she felt guilty because she had lied to her mother. So she went to her mother and said, "I have something hard to tell you. I know you'll be really angry with me. But I don't want to lie to you anymore."

Her mother said she wouldn't be mad at her for telling the truth. She could tell it was something important Alicia had to say. So she promised to listen. That helped Alicia feel a little better. She went ahead and told her mother what had happened. She said she was really sorry about not telling the truth about the cookies. "I was just so upset about the test. I was hungry and had been thinking about food a lot that day. I knew I shouldn't eat the whole bag, but I just couldn't stop myself. I don't understand, but that's the way it was."

Her mother had read about stress eating. She asked Alicia about her day. When she discovered that Alicia had skipped two meals and been upset about her test, she understood how it happened. "No wonder you ate like that," she said. "You were upset about the test. You thought food would make it better," she pointed out, "and you had skipped two meals, too." Then she explained about stress eating. "We've got to make sure that you eat three healthy meals each day—including breakfast. And we should plan your snacks in advance."

Her mother asked if this had ever happened before. Alicia said that she had never eaten a bag of cookies before. But she had eaten a bag of chips or a lot of ice cream a few times. Although she was ashamed of what she had done, she felt better telling her mother about it. "It really helps that you are listening to me without getting angry," she said. "I'd really like it if you could help me make a better eating plan for myself."

"I'd love to help you do that, Alicia. But there's one more thing I want you to promise me. Next time you get upset about something, I want you to tell me about it. It's a lot better to talk about feelings than to try to bury them with food. If you promise me this, we'll make a plan to improve your eating habits, *and* a plan to get back on track with history."

Stress eating doesn't work. In the end, you have to deal with what caused the feelings in the first place.

Did you ever feel like Alicia? When?

What did you do about it?

What would you do now?

What should I do if I've been doing some stress eating?

- ▶ Don't keep it secret. Be sure to tell your parents and your PAL. Let them know about every time you do it. That way they can help you help yourself.
- ▶ Look for patterns. Are there certain times of day that you do it? Are there certain foods? Or do you eat whatever foods are around?
- ▶ Examine your feelings. What event or what thought could have upset you? If you are worried about something, what could it be?
- ▶ Plan ways to deal with stress.
- ▶ Address the real problem. Identify what's making you feel bad. Then problem-solve and make a plan to deal with it. Use your parents, your friends, your PAL, and other resources to help you.
- ▶ Make sure you follow a healthy eating plan. That

means eating 3 meals and 2 well-planned snacks. If you are getting the nutrition you need, you are less likely to stress eat because your hunger is out of control.

- ▶ Plan an enjoyable, nutritious snack just before the time of day that you might be alone and might stress eat. That way you won't be hungry. You won't be as tempted to get started on RED foods or stress eat.
- ▶ Limit your access to RED foods. Talk to your parents about keeping RED snack foods out of the house. If they aren't there, you can't eat them. It's not very likely that you will stress eat with carrots, apples, or broccoli.
- ▶ Stay active when you are alone. Being around others will make it less likely that you will stress eat. Do activities you enjoy if you are alone. Plan some physical activity at a time you might be tempted to stress eat.

Skills and Goals for dealing with stress eating

- ▶ Identify *situations* that may cause stress eating.
- ▶ Identify *feelings* that may cause stress eating.
- ▶ Identify *thoughts* that may cause stress eating.
- ▶ Talk about my feelings with my parents and my PAL.
- ▶ Use my resources to protect myself from stress eating.

SPECIAL FOCUS

How can I avoid stress eating?

- ▶ Identify times and situations that could cause it.
- ▶ Plan ways to deal with your feelings in those situations.
- ▶ Use the Help Sheet to help you make a plan.
- ▶ Talk to your parents, your friends, and your PAL about your feelings.

Notes to myself—some things I want to keep in mind this week:

Emotional Eating

What Can I Do About Stress Eating?

Use the boxes below to identify situations when you have done stress eating. Some examples of situations that might cause you to feel stress are filled in. Use the last two boxes to write in other situations. Think about the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that went along with the situation.

When you answer the question in the last row, "What could you have done instead?" think about:

1. What you could have done right then to *deal with the feeling?*
2. What you could have done to *deal with the situation that caused the feeling?*

Situation: <i>Argument with a friend</i>	Feeling: <i>Sad and angry</i>	Thought: <i>My friend was being rude</i>	Behavior: <i>I walked out of the room</i>
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What did you eat? How much? *Chips—almost a full bag of the family size*

What could you have done instead? *Go for a walk to cool down. Then try to talk to my friend again.*

Situation: <i>My clothes make me look heavy</i>	Feeling:	Thought:	Behavior:
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What did you eat? How much?

What could you have done instead?

Situation: <i>Hard test coming up</i>	Feeling:	Thought:	Behavior:
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What did you eat? How much?

What could you have done instead?

Continued on next page

What Can I Do About Stress Eating? (Continued)

Situation:	Feeling:	Thought:	Behavior:
What did you eat? How much?			
What could you have done instead?			
Situation:	Feeling:	Thought:	Behavior:
What did you eat? How much?			
What could you have done instead?			

Do I Show Signs of Stress Eating?

Answer these questions about stress eating. Do some of them describe you? Talk about your answers with your parents and your PAL.

	Never or Almost Never	Sometimes	Always or Almost Always
1. My thoughts turn to food when I get upset.			
2. Negative thinking makes me want to eat.			
3. I eat fast and take in a lot of food without having time to enjoy it.			
4. I eat to satisfy a hungry feeling even though I am not physically hungry.			
5. I experience a strong need to eat that I cannot control.			
6. I have a fear of not being able to stop eating.			
7. After I overeat, I feel bad.			
8. I think about eating a lot and feel like I'm constantly struggling not to eat.			
9. I like to eat alone so that no one knows how much I eat.			
10. I eat so fast I don't feel full until I'm stuffed.			
11. I stuff myself. I eat way more than is healthy or normal for anyone.			
12. I feel like I live to eat.			

What Are My Alternatives?

Here are ways you can handle strong emotions that do not involve eating. Copy the most important ones for you onto a list that you can keep handy. Use that list the next time a strong emotion makes you think about eating.

1. Call a friend.
2. Call a friend and talk about my feelings.
3. Talk to my parents.
4. Get some physical activity.
5. Do relaxation exercises.
6. Get some physical activity with a friend.
7. Take a walk.
8. Listen to music.
9. Read a book or magazine.
10. Write about my thoughts and feelings.
11. Figure out what is causing the feelings.
12. Make a plan to deal with what is causing the feelings.
13. Remember I do _____ well.
14. Remember _____ cares about me.
15. _____
16. _____
17. _____

Now I Know My Weaknesses

These are the feelings most likely to cause me to do stress eating:

My Action Plan

The most important things I want to keep in mind about feelings, eating, and being healthy are:

Emotional Eating

Emotional eating or stress eating is using food to deal with emotions.

Clues that you may be doing some stress eating

- ▶ Shutting down when something bad happens. Feelings that don't get talked about cause more stress. This *could* lead to stress eating.
- ▶ Turning to food right after being upset.
- ▶ Eating much more than most people would eat in the same situation.
- ▶ Eating when you are not hungry.
- ▶ Eating in secret. Would you be embarrassed if anyone saw you eating so much?
- ▶ Eating too fast without taking time to enjoy it.
- ▶ Eating until you feel uncomfortable and stuffed.
- ▶ Feeling out of control with your eating.
- ▶ Feeling bad about yourself after eating.



What triggers stress eating?

- ▶ Upsetting feelings
- ▶ Hunger
- ▶ Negative thinking

What's wrong with stress eating?

- ▶ You may gain weight.
- ▶ You often feel bad afterwards.
- ▶ You still have to face your real problems.

What to do if you've been doing some stress eating

- ▶ Don't keep it secret. Tell your parents and your PAL.
- ▶ Look for patterns. Are there certain times of day that you do it? Certain foods?
- ▶ Examine your feelings. What event or what thought could have upset you?
- ▶ Address the real problem. Problem-solve and make a plan to deal with it.
- ▶ Make sure you follow a healthy eating plan:
 - ▶ 3 healthy meals
 - ▶ 2 well-planned snacks
- ▶ Plan an enjoyable, nutritious snack just before the time of day that you might be alone and stress eat.
- ▶ Limit your access to RED foods.
- ▶ Stay active when you are alone.