

# Emotional Eating

**PARENTS ASK:**

## What's 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.

There are two parts to stress eating:

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

**PARENTS ASK:**

## How can I tell if my son is stress eating?

Some clues you can see for yourself. You may have to talk to your son to learn about other clues. Here are some signs to watch for:

- ▶ 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. Does your son eat much more than most people would eat in the same situation? It's more than snacking on a brownie. It's

**KEY GOALS**

## Understanding emotional eating will help your child meet 4 key goals:

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

finishing off 4 brownies at a time. That could be a clue.

- ▶ Eating in secret. He may be embarrassed if anyone saw



## 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 or your child are stress eating



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

him eating so much.

- ▶ Eating too fast without taking time to enjoy it.
- ▶ Eating until he feels uncomfortable and stuffed.
- ▶ Feeling out of control with his eating.
- ▶ Feeling bad about himself after eating.

If your child is doing some of these things, he may be doing stress eating. It's worth looking into. Activities on the Help Sheet can help you and your son figure it out.

PARENTS ASK:

### How can I help my daughter learn to control her stress eating?

Your daughter needs to figure out what caused her to do it. This means looking at what happened to her during the day. You can help her do this. She should pay special attention to upsetting feelings, getting too hungry, and negative thinking.

- ▶ Hunger can also trigger stress eating. Being too hungry causes stress. Sometimes a person who is really trying hard to lose weight will skip meals during the day. She might skip breakfast and hardly eat anything at lunch. *It 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 help her look at her eating habits during the day. She could be eating healthy foods that she really doesn't like. It might seem as if she's been depriving herself. That's why it's important to plan healthy meals and snacks that *she likes*. It's better to eat a small portion of a RED food that she likes during the day than to fill up on RED foods at the end of the day.

- ▶ 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. One of the first things she needs to do is to figure out what feelings might have triggered her stress eating. You can help by asking her questions like these: *What happened before you ate? What put stress on you? How were you feeling? How did you react? What did you eat? How much? How did you feel afterwards?*

- ▶ Negative thinking can trigger 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.

PARENTS ASK:

### What's wrong with eating to feel better?

In the end, it never works. Your son might feel better while eating. But he still needs to deal with whatever caused the feeling in the first place.

Eating chocolate cake isn't going to change a



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 trash bag. "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."

How did Alicia's mom help her?

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What could you do to help your child deal with emotional eating?

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

PARENTS ASK:

### What should I do if my child is doing some stress eating?

- ▶ Encourage her to talk about it.
- ▶ Look for patterns. Are there certain times of the day that she does it? Certain foods?
- ▶ Ask about her feelings. *What event or what thought could have upset you? If you are worried about something, what could it be?*
- ▶ Help her plan ways to deal with stress.

### How to help your child avoid stress eating

- ▶ Help her identify times and situations that could cause it.
- ▶ Help her identify feelings that may cause it.
- ▶ Help her plan ways to deal with her feelings in those situations.
- ▶ Use the Help Sheet for making a plan.
- ▶ Encourage her to talk to you, her friends, and her PAL about her feelings.

- ▶ Help her address the real problem.
  - ▶ First, help her identify what's making her feel bad.
  - ▶ Then help her make a plan to deal with it.
  - ▶ Encourage her to use all of her resources.
- ▶ Make sure she follows a healthy eating plan. That means eating 3 healthy meals and 2 well-planned snacks. If she gets the nutrition she needs, she will be less likely to stress eat because her hunger is out of control.
- ▶ Plan an enjoyable, nutritious snack just before the time of day that she might be alone and might stress eat. That way she won't be too hungry. She won't be as tempted to get started on RED foods or stress eat.

### How to help yourself deal with stress eating

- ▶ Identify 2 high-risk situations you face.
- ▶ Identify the feelings that cause stress eating.
- ▶ Plan in advance how you can deal with them.
- ▶ Keep track of results.
- ▶ Keep RED snack foods out of the house. It's not very likely that she will stress eat with carrots, apples, or broccoli.
- ▶ Encourage her to stay active when she is alone. Help her plan activities she enjoys when she's alone. Plan some physical activity. Being around others will make it less likely that she will stress eat.

# Emotional Eating

## Prepare to Help Your Child

Your child has some activities about stress eating. So do you. These activities will help your child see when he does stress eating. They will also help him avoid doing it. Go over these activities with your child. Ask lots of questions. Your questions will help make things more clear for your child.

The best way to prepare for this is to do the activities yourself. Don't be surprised if you find you do some stress eating. Many people do.

## 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:	Feeling:	Thought:	Behavior:
<i>Argument with a friend</i>	<i>Sad and angry</i>	<i>My friend was being rude</i>	<i>I walked out of the room</i>

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:	Feeling:	Thought:	Behavior:
<i>Clothes make me look heavy</i>			

What did you eat? How much?

What could you have done instead?

Situation:	Feeling:	Thought:	Behavior:
<i>Stress at work</i>			

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 You or Your Child Show Signs of Stress Eating?

*Answer these questions about stress eating for yourself first, then for your child.*

	My Stress Eating			My Child's Stress Eating		
	Never or Almost Never	Some- times	Always or Almost Always	Never or Almost Never	Some- times	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.						

# Emotional Eating

## 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 partner or another family member.
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 emotional eating:

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### *My Action Plan*

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

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# Emotional Eating

**Emotional eating or Stress eating is using food to deal with emotions.**

## How to tell if your child is doing stress eating

Some clues you can see. You may have to talk your son to learn about other clues. Here are some signs to watch for:

- ▶ 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 he is not hungry.
- ▶ Eating in secret. He may be embarrassed if anyone saw him eating so much.
- ▶ Eating too fast without taking time to enjoy it.
- ▶ Eating until he feels uncomfortable and stuffed.
- ▶ Feeling out of control with his eating.
- ▶ Feeling bad about himself 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 your child has been doing some stress eating

- ▶ Encourage her to talk about it.
- ▶ Look for patterns. Are there certain times of day that she does it? Certain foods?
- ▶ Ask about feelings. What event or what thought could have upset her?
- ▶ Help her address the real problem. Make a plan together.
- ▶ Make sure she follows a healthy eating plan every day:
  - ▶ 3 healthy meals
  - ▶ 2 well-planned snacks
- ▶ Plan an enjoyable, nutritious snack just before the time of day she might be alone and stress eat.
- ▶ Keep RED snack foods out of the house.
- ▶ Encourage her to stay active when she is alone.

