

WHY DID I JUST EAT ALL THAT? Overcoming Emotional/Stress-related Eating

We often turn to food to handle anger, anxiety, boredom, sadness, loneliness, etc. Food is often used as a form of entertainment and distraction. Understanding the difference between “hunger” and “appetite” can be the first step in overcoming emotional/stress-related eating.

Hunger is the body’s PHYSIOLOGICAL desire for food/nourishment. True hunger usually comes on gradually. When you are physiologically hungry, usually a variety of foods is appealing (“I’m so hungry I could eat anything!”).

Appetite involves the body’s PSYCHOLOGICAL desire to eat. When seeking to satisfy your appetite, you’ll typically find that you want a specific food or type of food (“I want something salty”, “I need chocolate!”, “That fruit just doesn’t sound good right now”). You’ll notice that the desire to satisfy your appetite often comes on suddenly.

So, what do you do when you find yourself heading into an emotional eating dilemma? Try these tips:

Have an internal dialogue with yourself. Walk yourself through the moment allowing yourself to think through your level of hunger vs your desire to fulfill an emotional need. Ask yourself questions like: “Am I really hungry right now?”, “If there was no food here right now, what would I do? How would I respond to this feeling/emotion/stressful event?”, What needs to change in my life to break this pattern of stress that is so severe that it is causing me to overeat?

Know your triggers. A detailed food record that includes moods, circumstances, and triggers to overeating may reveal why you make poor food choices at times. Becoming aware of these situations, patterns, and trends can help you formulate a strategy to deal with these events BEFORE they occur.

Use non-food items for comfort. Make a list of things you can do to turn your attention away from food when you are tempted to eat for reasons other than hunger. Keep the list with you and use it! Ideas include: calling a friend, taking a bath, checking email/facebook, brushing your pet, reading a magazine, cleaning/dusting, saying a prayer, meditating, taking a nap, playing a game of solitaire, writing a letter, going outside to run/bike or smell the flowers, drinking a bottle of water, etc.

Out of sight – out of mind! Changing health-related behaviors is hard enough! Don’t set yourself up for failure by surrounding yourself with the very foods that seduce you!

Keep Moving! Regular exercise can help reduce stress, even out mood swings, and help you reach your fitness goals.

Honor your hunger. Keep your body physiologically fed with adequate calories and healthy foods. Eating balanced meals and snacks every 3 hours or so will keep you energized and satisfied, making it much easier to stay “in control”. Once you reach the point of excessive

hunger, you trigger a primal, innate urge to overeat and all intentions of moderate, healthy eating go out the window.

Respect your fullness. Pay attention to your body's cues that you are no longer hungry. Remember to eat slowly...because it can take the stomach 20 minutes to tell the brain that it's full. Take a moment during your meal for self-reflection: "How does this food taste? Am I really still enjoying it? What is my current fullness level?"

Keep your self-confidence up with positive self talk. Think about the differences in the following statements:

❶ "I shouldn't have eaten that chocolate cake! I'm so stupid. I'm just a hopeless case. My family stresses me out and undermines my self-control. I'll never get down to a size 10. I should just give up"

vs.

❷ "I wish I hadn't eaten that chocolate cake! It wasn't a good choice and I'm smart enough to make good choices. Looking back, I realize I wasn't hungry. I was stressed, and I was only wanting to calm down. How can I calm down in a healthy positive way? I'm determined to get down to a size 10 and mistakes are just part of the learning process."

And...

❸ "I'll never find time to fit exercise into my daily routine"

vs.

❹ "Plenty of others have found time to do it, so can I!"

Other positive mantras:

❺ "Behavior change is difficult, but if I work at it, I will succeed."

❻ I am a strong, capable person. I can maintain my commitment to change."

Trust your body and be patient with yourself. Changes take time, repetition, and positive mindset. Consider each "indulgence" an opportunity to further understand your relationship with food. Allow yourself permission to eat - even your favorite foods...and pay close attention to your body's cues so you can trust it to let you know when you are hungry and when you are full. With a positive attitude, some self-reflection, some prioritization, and some good hard work, YOU CAN overcome emotional eating.