

Stress and Emotions: Are You “Cramming” for Exams?

As midterm exams hit and papers are due, it's not uncommon to find study areas littered with empty pizza boxes, chip bags and candy wrappers. Most college students are exposed to a variety of stressors and emotions – studying, managing a tight budget, fighting homesickness, finding privacy, getting housing/parking, making new friends, getting dates, etc. Students that are stressed out or dealing with new and/or strong emotions often turn to food to soothe themselves or provide a distraction from the issues they face. Although we all eat for emotional reasons sometimes, doing this too often can become a habit, and may lead to unwanted weight gain.

One of the keys to regaining control of your eating habits is to understand the difference between hunger and appetite. Hunger involves the body's *physiological* desire for food/nourishment. Appetite involves our *psychological* desire to eat. True hunger usually comes on gradually. When you are physiologically “hungry”, generally a variety of food will be appealing (“I’m so hungry, I’ll eat anything!”). Conversely, when you seek to satisfy your “appetite” (psychological need) you’ll typically find that you want a specific food or type of food (i.e. “I want something salty” or “I need ice cream!” Or “That fruit doesn’t sound good”). You’ll notice that this desire often comes on quickly.

If you recognize that you’re heading into the “stress/emotional eating” realm, take a minute to yourself. Drink a glass of water. Walk yourself through the moment, asking yourself, “Am I really hungry?” Give yourself a minute to think through your level of hunger vs. your desire to fill an emotional need. Ask yourself questions like, “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?”

It's important to discover what specific situations or emotions spur you on to eat more. A detailed food record that includes “triggers” and feelings while you eat may reveal what is causing you to overeat. Once you determine this, you can brainstorm strategies to overcome this habit.

Consider making a list of several things you can do to turn your attention away from food when you're tempted to eat (or overeat) for emotional reasons.

Examples 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 that you'll never send, going outside to run/bike or smell the flowers, drinking a bottle of water, etc. Keep your list with you and USE IT! Learning to use non-food items for comfort is an important step in changing your habit.

Remember to keep tempting foods out of sight. Changing health-related behaviors is hard enough...don't set yourself up for failure by surrounding yourself with the very foods that seduce you! It'll be much easier to resist that temptation to eat ice cream if you have to get up, put on your shoes, find your keys, and drive to go get it.

And truthfully, if you're experiencing a craving that strong, then it's okay to indulge mindfully. Make a quick trip to McDonald's for a SINGLE SERVE cone and be done with it. Don't make the mistake of picking up a ½ gallon of ice cream and taking it home...the temptation will continue until you've eaten all the ice cream! Whatever your craving may be (chocolate, chips, cookies, etc), if you choose to indulge, just purchase a single serving. Sometimes brushing your teeth or chewing a piece of sugar free gum (getting the taste of the food out of your mouth) can help you stop once you've started.

Staying on a healthy eating plan that includes 3 meals along with healthy snacks will help keep you energized and feeling "in control". If you are consistently enjoying a diet that emphasizes whole grains fruits and vegetables and includes lean proteins and low fat dairy, on a schedule that allows for eating a little something every 2-4 hours, you'll feel satisfied and full longer and it'll be easier to control those cravings.

Make sure to keep exercising. Exercise can do wonders to reduce stress and even out those mood swings. Find something that you like doing to bring pleasure to your workouts. The rec offers a variety of activities and group classes – ever tried yoga? Give that climbing wall a try. Take advantage of that gorgeous pool. How about a zumba class?

Remember that stress/emotional eating isn't always bad. Many people occasionally use food for comfort without any long-term damage. Think about most American holidays – most of our celebrations revolve around food! Stress/emotional eating becomes a problem when it becomes a habit.

Lastly, be patient with yourself. Consider each “indulgence” an opportunity to further understand your relationship with food. Changes in habits take time, repetition, and a positive mindset.