

## Emotional Eating

Eating is an emotional experience for most of us. We were all given messages about food as children and those tend to carry over into adulthood. As children we are often rewarded with food: "If you clean your plate you can have dessert"; "You made the honor roll/swim team/debate club! Let's go out to eat or make a special dinner to celebrate!" When children are sad we will try to cheer them up with a sweet treat. Emotional eating is a way to soothe negative emotions that are brought on by major life events and daily stressors. Many of us never learned how to deal with our emotions without food, and it is a skill we need to learn and teach our children! The challenge for many of us that struggle with weight or emotional eating is there is no option of going "cold turkey". We all have to eat to live.



### Hungry Eating vs. Emotional Eating

When we are eating because we are hungry it is biological and occurs after a period of fasting. Hunger usually occurs slowly and we eat because we feel the pangs. Usually we are open to various foods and finish eating when we feel full. When we emotional eat we are eating due to strong feelings, generally when we are happy, sad or bored. We feel an intense urge to eat and will eat larger amounts of food. We keep eating even when we feel full and at times can be aware of feeling out of control with our eating. What we eat depends on our mood. People that are happy tend to eat pizza or steak. If we are sad we go for ice cream or cookies and when we are bored we reach for the potato chips. Emotional eating accounts for 75% of the overeating in America.

There are usually two motivations for emotional eating. When we feel deprived we treat ourselves to fill a need that isn't being met. We also use food to self-medicate in order to soothe in response to negative feelings such as grief, anger, fear, worry, loneliness, emptiness, sadness, stress, boredom or anxiety. Eating can also be associated with good moods or to maintain a good mood. A diet can cause emotional eating because it escalates our feelings of deprivation. Restricting food may be able to make us feel less in control.

### How Can We Intervene with Emotional Eating?



#### Managing Emotional Cravings

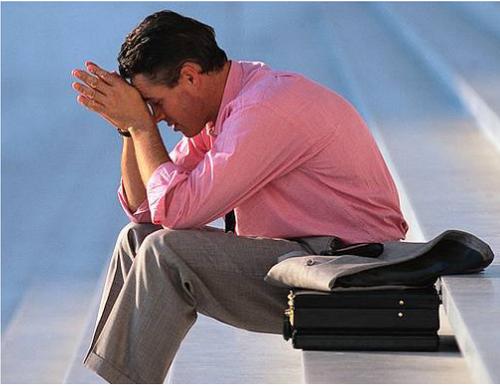
Emotional eating is actually a three step process: the feeling creates a craving, which causes the compulsive eating. In most cravings, we unconsciously move from the feeling to the action. We need "crisis intervention" skills for the immediate cravings. For long-term change it's important to examine the emotional eating and change our relationship to food.

There are steps you can take to manage the cravings: Recognize the craving and decide if you are really hungry. If you are hungry, choose to eat a small portion of healthy food. If you are not hungry, try to distance or distract yourself from the situation by giving yourself a time delay or talking out the feelings with someone you know and trust. Exercise off the emotional energy or try meditation or relaxation activities.

#### Examine your Emotional Eating

The important thing is to gain awareness of the times you emotionally eat. You can recognize the "triggers" that lead to eating and be realistic about your goals. You can begin the process of changing our relationship with food and find alternative ways to satisfy the feelings.

Ask yourself the following questions about eating: What was going on in my life? What am I feeling before I eat that way? What would happen if I just allow myself to feel those feelings? What emotional need isn't getting satisfied? What ways can I find to satisfy that need? Once you have identified the triggers, you can begin to change your responses and address the specific issues. For example, if you are coping with a large amount of stress you can use stress management skills and find other ways to treat yourself such as time off, baths, walks or calling a friend or if you are struggling with perfectionism you can work at relaxing your standards and accepting that it is ok to be human and practice moderation. Clarifying what your issues are will help guide your next steps to managing the food in your life.



### Coping with Feelings

Often emotional eating does mean ongoing emotional distress. The emotions are making the decision about the eating. Ask yourself “what is my emotional clutter?” and be open to experiencing the feelings to help identify and air out the underlying emotions beneath the emotional eating. We need to listen to what our bodies are telling us and realize that whatever the feeling, we are strong enough to handle it. We need to allow ourselves to feel the feelings and express those feelings to a supportive person. You could consider a support group or individual counseling. Stress management strategies can be an important part of coping with

your feelings. You can give yourself a “time out” from stressful situations and use deep breathing or muscle relaxation techniques. Work at allowing things to be imperfect, chew gum and laugh frequently – at the circumstances, at life’s absurdities, at yourself. Try using writing, drawing, music and other art forms and soothe yourself by doing something that will appeal to the five senses.

### Mindful Eating

When we eat mindfully, we are fully aware of the action of eating. We slowly savor the taste, scents and textures of our meal while we are eating it and appreciate the nourishment it provides. Some suggestions for mindful eating are: Eat while seated without outside distractions such as TV or reading. Examine the color, shape and texture of your food. Smell the food, both cooked and uncooked. Roll the food on your tongue briefly. Chew it slowly and thoroughly taste each bite. Listen to the sound of the food’s texture. Pause in between bites, putting down your fork.

### Take Care of Your Physical Health

The better our overall health, the more capable we are of coping with our feelings. It is important to get regular exercise, frequent recreation, enough sleep and regular checkups. Exercising and managing our stress can decrease our need to emotionally eat and help us feel more in control of our lives.

If you need assistance, remember that CONCERN is here to provide counseling or make referrals to other organizations to assist you in your efforts, and it is a free service!

Article adapted from Emotional Eating presentation from CONCERN Services

