Healthy Eating: Dealing With Emotional Eating

What is emotional eating?
Emotional eating means that you eat for reasons other than hunger. You may eat because you're sad, tired, stressed, or lonely. Or you may use food as a reward. Food can be soothing and distract you from what's really bothering you.

Big life events, like losing a job, can cause emotions that lead you to eat more. So can small hassles like being late for work.

How can you avoid eating too much?
If you are an emotional eater, you may not listen to your body's natural signals. A hunger scale can help you learn how to tell the difference between true, physical hunger and wanting to eat because of your emotions.

When you start feeling like you want something to eat, rate your hunger on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being starving and 10 being so full you feel sick. A rating of 5 or 6 means you're comfortable—you're not too hungry or too full.

Eat when your hunger is at 3 or 4. If you feel like eating but your hunger level is a 6 or higher on the scale, stop and check your emotions. Ask yourself if you are really hungry or if you are eating for another reason, such as feeling bored or upset.

Respond to your triggers
When you start to recognize things that trigger emotional eating, you can change the way you respond to those triggers. Instead of reaching for a candy bar or bag of chips to soothe your emotions, try these ideas instead:

• Take a short break to relax.
• Think about what is really bothering you and how you could deal with it.
• Change what you're doing. Take a short walk down the hall or around the block.
• Call a friend.

If you are truly hungry, reach for a healthy meal or snack.

Learn when to stop eating
When you eat, try to stop before you get too full. Too full is uncomfortable. It means you ate too much.

Get in touch with what "satisfied," or "pleasantly full," feels like for you.
Try these tips:

- Stop and take a few breaths before you start eating, and then eat slowly.
- Stop a quarter of the way through your meal, and check your hunger level. If you're still hungry, keep eating, but stop again at the halfway point.
- Remember that you don't have to clean your plate.
- Learn what proper portions are. Restaurant portions are usually larger than you need.

**How can an eating journal help?**

An eating journal will help you identify things that trigger emotional eating. Here's an example of a journal.

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<th>Eating journal</th>
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For a week or two, write down everything you eat. Record the time of day and what you were feeling right before you ate.

Look for patterns in your eating. Pay attention to things that lead you to eat when you are not hungry. Be aware of how often you eat out of true hunger and how that feels.

**Getting support**

A dietitian or counselor can help you understand your emotions and eating habits.