

### Weller Health Tip for Teens: Emotional Eating

Imagine you've had a fight with your best friend. It's a stupid fight, something you'll both get over. But right now you're upset. When you walk in the door, your mom asks what's wrong. How are you most likely to respond?

Tell your mom what happened and have a long, comforting talk about it.

or

Tell your mom, "Everything's fine" and head to the freezer for the ice cream.

But can that pint of Rocky Road really help you feel better — or just make you feel sickeningly full?

### What Is Emotional Eating?

Emotional eating is when people use food as a way to deal with feelings instead of to satisfy hunger. We've all been there, finishing a whole bag of chips out of boredom or downing cookie after cookie while cramming for a big test. But when done a lot — especially without realizing it — emotional eating can affect weight, health, and overall well-being.

Not many of us make the connection between eating and our feelings. But understanding what drives emotional eating can help people take steps to change it.

One of the biggest myths about emotional eating is that it's prompted by negative feelings. Yes, people often turn to food when they're stressed out, lonely, sad, anxious, or bored. But emotional eating can be linked to positive feelings too, like the romance of sharing dessert on Valentine's Day or the celebration of a holiday feast.

Sometimes emotional eating is tied to major life events, like a death or a divorce. More often, though, it's the countless little daily stresses that cause someone to seek comfort or distraction in food.

Emotional eating patterns can be learned: A child who is given candy after a big achievement may grow up using candy as a reward for a job well done. A kid who is given cookies as a way to stop crying may learn to link cookies with comfort.

It's not easy to "unlearn" patterns of emotional eating. But it is possible. And it starts with an awareness of what's going on.

### "Comfort" Foods

We all have our own comfort foods. Interestingly, they may vary according to moods and gender. One study found that happy people seem to want to eat things like pizza, while sad people prefer ice cream and cookies. Bored people crave salty, crunchy things, like chips. Researchers also found that guys seem to prefer hot, homemade comfort meals, like steaks and casseroles. Girls go for chocolate and ice cream.

This brings up a curious question: Does no one take comfort in carrots and celery sticks? Researchers are looking into that, too. What they're finding is that high-fat foods, like ice cream, may activate certain chemicals in the body that create a sense of contentment and fulfillment. This almost addictive quality may actually make you reach for these foods again when feeling upset.

### Physical Hunger vs. Emotional Hunger

We're all emotional eaters to some extent (who hasn't suddenly found room for dessert after a filling dinner?). But for some people, emotional eating can be a real problem, causing serious weight gain or cycles of binging and purging.

*eating, continued on page 2*

*eating, continued*

The trouble with emotional eating (aside from the health issues) is that once the pleasure of eating is gone, the feelings that cause it remain. And you often may feel worse about eating the amount or type of food you did. That's why it helps to know the differences between physical hunger and emotional hunger.

Next time you reach for a snack, check in and see which type of hunger is driving it.

### **Questions to Ask Yourself**

*You can also ask yourself these questions about your eating:*

- Have I been eating larger portions than usual?
- Do I eat at unusual times?
- Do I feel a loss of control around food?
- Am I anxious over something, like school, a social situation, or an event where my abilities might be tested?
- Has there been a big event in my life that I'm having trouble dealing with?
- Am I already overweight or obese, or has there recently been a big jump in my weight or body mass index (BMI)?
- Do other people in my family use food to soothe their feelings too?

If you answered yes to many of these questions, then it's possible that eating has become a coping mechanism instead of a way to fuel your body.

### **Breaking the Cycle**

Managing emotional eating means finding other ways to deal with the situations and feelings that make someone turn to food. For example, do you come home from school each day and automatically head to the kitchen? Stop and ask yourself, "Am I really hungry?" Is your stomach growling? Are you having difficulty concentrating or feeling irritable? If these signs point to hunger, choose something light and healthy to take the edge off until dinner.

Not really hungry? If the post-school food foraging has just become part of your routine, think about why.

### **Tips to Try**

*These three techniques can help:*

1. Explore why you're eating and find a replacement activity.

For example:

If you're bored or lonely, call or text a friend or family member.

If you're stressed out, try a yoga routine. Or listen to some feel-good tunes and let off some steam by jogging in place, doing jumping jacks, or dancing around your room until the urge to eat passes.

If you're tired, rethink your bedtime routine. Tiredness can feel a lot like hunger, and food won't help if sleepless nights are causing daytime fatigue.

If you're eating to procrastinate, open those books and get that homework over with. You'll feel better afterwards (honestly!).

2. Write down the emotions that trigger your eating. One of the best ways to keep track is with a mood and food journal. Write down what you ate, how much, and how you felt as you ate (e.g., bored, happy, worried, sad, mad) and whether you were really hungry or just eating for comfort.

*eating, continued on page 3*

*eating, continued*

Through journaling, you'll start to see patterns emerging between what you feel and what you eat. You'll be able to use this information to make better choices (like choosing to clear your head with a walk around the block instead of a bag of Doritos).

3. Pause and "take 5" before you reach for food. Too often, we rush through the day without really checking in with ourselves. We're so stressed, overscheduled, and plugged-in that we lose out on time to reflect.

Instead of eating when you get in the door, take a few minutes to transition from one part of your day to another. Go over the things that happened that day. Acknowledge how they made you feel: Happy? Grateful? Excited? Angry? Worried? Jealous? Left out?

### **Getting Help**

Even when we understand what's going on, many of us still need help breaking the cycle of emotional eating. It's not easy — especially when emotional eating has already led to weight and self-esteem issues. So don't go it alone when you don't have to.

Take advantage of expert help. Counselors and therapists can help you deal with your feelings. Nutritionists can help you identify your eating patterns and get you on track with a better diet. Fitness experts can get your body's feel-good chemicals firing through exercise instead of food.

If you're worried about your eating, talk to your doctor. He or she can make sure you reach your weight-loss goals safely and put you in touch with professionals who can put you on a path to a new, healthier relationship with food.

This information was provided by the Weller Health Education Center. For more medically reviewed health information written for parents, kids and teens, please visit [www.wellercenter.org](http://www.wellercenter.org).

©2010 The Nemours Foundation/KidsHealth. Used under license.