Emotional Eating

A large part of our lives revolves around food and eating. We have to eat to have strength and energy to be healthy. Also, people in almost all cultures traditionally gather together and commonly mark their celebration and sometimes mourning events by preparing, serving and eating food. These are examples of emotional eating, which is a normal part of our life. It is a part of being a human and is a part of our social being. However, a problem emerges when eating begins to significantly impact one’s emotional and physical well-being and becomes the primary coping strategy for mood enhancement.

Why do people use food for emotional regulation?

The simple answer is, because it really works, at least temporarily. We use food to soothe and comfort ourselves, to manage feelings that we don’t know how to handle otherwise. A pint of ice cream or a plate of cookies would never reject or judge you, and it will always be there for you. However, while it does feel good for a little while, this good feeling does not endure. The actual cause of the emotional discomfort, such as feeling angry, sad, frustrated, etc., quickly returns. Emotional overeaters have to deal with the guilt and shame every time he or she eats the “forbidden” foods and exceeds the “permitted” amounts. Therefore, food as a mood regulator, while it works in a short run, will eventually betray us.

A typical day for an emotional eater may revolve around thinking about food. Then they unsuccessfully try to avoid thinking about it, eat, probably overeat, and as a result get upset for not exercising better self-control. This process often repeats itself in a cycle, becoming a significant part of one’s life thereby increasingly adding to one’s personal discomfort and upset feelings. This cycle becomes a trap for emotional eaters. When eating becomes a primary stress management and emotional coping strategy, it may contribute to personal distress thus negatively affecting a person’s quality of life. At the most extreme point on the emotional eating continuum, there may be a diagnosable eating disorder present, such as Bulimia Nervosa or Binge Eating Disorder, as well as other psychological conditions.

However, even when one’s emotional eating patterns do not become a clinical problem, constantly rotating between overeating and trying to diet can lead to significant personal discomfort, such as a sense of distress and feeling out of control. It can also lead to physical problems.

Both eating and thinking about eating can work as distractions from uncomfortable feelings that a person would rather not feel or tolerate, such as boredom, stress, anxiety, anger, loneliness, or sadness. Take, for example, studying for a test you’re anxious about. You anticipate many hours of tedious work in hopes of doing well and obtaining a good grade. Suddenly, you may feel like you could eat something. This allows you to postpone the difficult task of studying while you are busy doing something else “necessary,” but rather pleasant -- feeding yourself. Or imagine another scenario: you are feeling bored and start thinking about a pint of ice cream you have in your freezer. As soon as you start thinking about it and walk toward the refrigerator, you’ve just found something to do and may no longer feel bored! Thus, thinking about food and eating can be used in reaction to and as a defense against intense unpleasant feelings or stressful life situations. It may also be used to prolong a sense of feeling good, comfortable, happy, or content. For instance, how many times after eating a tasty and satisfying meal and no longer feeling hungry, will we still go for a piece of cake just because it feels good and extends our pleasure by another few minutes?

Of course, there are some chemical reactions in our bodies that may also contribute to food cravings. There are many physiological reasons why we may keep turning to certain foods at certain times, and scientists are researching the connecting links between brain chemistry and food cravings. However, a large part of continuous snacking, grazing, and binging is explained by our unsettled emotions and our inability to deal with them in other ways. Recognizing when and how emotional eating occurs, what it feels like, how it is different from actual physical hunger, and learning to overcome the false “hungry” urge is an important step in improving one’s lifestyle and feeling better about oneself.
What is the starting point then? We can start by trying to make a conscious effort to become more aware of how and why we may be using food and by trying to identify and develop new skills for mood regulation. Some strategies are going for a walk, meditating, or treating yourself by watching an interesting movie or reading a book or journal that you like. Depending on personal preferences, people will likely find many different strategies, which would work well for them. Regardless, the focus should be on self-care and improved emotional and physical well-being, on eating well and being fit. Focusing on dieting and weight loss is a dangerous trap for an emotional eater. Ironically, the more preoccupied we are with an idea of not eating, the more likely we are to continuously think about food and are less likely we are to resist overeating. If a personal effort of overcoming emotional eating does not come easily and you need further support, it is a good idea to find appropriate professional help: a psychologist for emotional eating, a physician to assess if there is a medical reason, and/or a licensed dietician.