



ATTENTIVE
HEALTH

are you an emotional eater?

"It's Saturday night & I have nothing to do..."

"My son is leaving for college..."

"Arguing with my wife really stresses me out..."

When the stresses of life become overwhelming, do you tear open a Hershey bar, a bag of Doritos, or a supersized McDonald's meal in an attempt to regain your tranquility? Do you find yourself, instead, more stressed because you are losing the battle against overeating?

According to the experts, 75% of overeating is caused by emotions. Many of us use food as a comforter, rather than learn the skills to effectively resolve our emotional distress. Recognizing the emotional triggers that cause us to overeat can be the first step to winning the battle.

STEP 1: IDENTIFYING EMOTIONAL TRIGGERS THAT CAUSE US TO OVEREAT

- ◎ **social.** Excessive eating can be a result of various social pressures. Some examples are: being encouraged by others to eat—for instance, at holiday gatherings; eating to fit in with the crowd; or eating to cover feelings of inadequacy around others. Also, stressful situations, such as being involved in an argument, can cause us to try to pacify the pain of anxiety by eating.
- ◎ **emotional.** Eating in response to boredom, stress, fatigue, tension, depression, anger, anxiety, or loneliness may feel medicinal at the moment, but is a temporary way to “fill the void.”
- ◎ **situational.** Sometimes we eat simply because the opportunity presents itself. We may be passing by a restaurant or a bakery and notice an enticing advertisement that calls our name and lures us in. Similarly, TV commercials can be notorious for sending us running to the fridge for a tasty snack. Eating may also be associated with certain activities, such as going to the movies or attending sporting events.
- ◎ **psychological.** At times, we eat as a result of negative self-worth and make excuses to quiet our conscience. We may scold ourselves for our looks or lack of will power, and sabotage our health in the process by eating to punish ourselves.
- ◎ **physiological.** When we eat in response to physical cues, such as increased hunger due to skipping meals, fatigue, headaches, or other bodily pains, we are merely covering up symptoms, rather than addressing root causes. Eating regularly spaced meals, getting approximately seven hours of sleep per evening, and learning techniques to manage pain, can all help us to overcome the battle to eat *other* than when we are truly hungry.

"Being hungry is like being in love: if you don't know, you're probably not." —GENEEN ROTH

STEP 2: DEVELOPING A STRATEGY TO OVERCOME EMOTIONAL EATING

- ◎ **identify your triggers.** Keep a food diary of what and when you eat, as well as the emotions you identify as you eat.

- ◎ **develop alternative habits to eating.** Engage in an alternate activity to change your focus from food. As you involve yourself in an activity, the urge will pass. Some helpful alternatives include:
 - ▶ read a book by your favorite author or a magazine
 - ▶ listen to music
 - ▶ go for a walk or jog
 - ▶ talk to a friend or write a letter
 - ▶ do household chores or wash the car
 - ▶ play cards or a board game
 - ▶ be creative in your garden
 - ▶ do deep breathing exercises
 - ▶ take a bubble bath

- ◎ **if distracting yourself isn't enough.** If developing alternative habits is not enough to manage the emotional distress that leads to excessive eating, try the following to more effectively cope:
 - ▶ relaxation exercises (stretching, etc.)
 - ▶ prayer / meditation
 - ▶ individual or group counseling

As you learn to incorporate more appropriate coping strategies to curb compulsive eating, try rewarding yourself with a new outfit, a fishing pole, a vacation, etc. for a job well done. Rewarding behavior is more likely to help you maintain your new healthy habits.

healthy eating guidelines

1. *Eat when you are hungry – not when you are stressed.*
2. *Eat sitting down in a calm environment – not in your car.*
3. *Eat without distractions – no radio, TV, newspapers, books, intense or anxiety-producing conversations or music.*
4. *Eat only what you want.*
5. *Eat until you are satisfied.*
6. *Eat (with the intention of being) in full view of others.*
7. *Eat with enjoyment, pleasure, and gusto.*

sources:

"*Breaking Free from Emotional Eating*" by Geneen Roth. New York: Penguin Group, 2004. pp. 3-16.

"*Why Weight? A Guide to Ending Compulsive Eating*" by Geneen Roth. New York: Penguin Group, 1989. pp.17- 18.

"*Weight Loss: Emotional Eating.*" WebMD Medical Reference in collaboration with the Cleveland Clinic. Oct 2011.