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How to Manage Emotional Eating

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If you have even indulged in a pint of ice cream when you are feeling down or eaten an entire bag of chips without realizing it when you are bored, you have engaged in emotional eating. The purpose of emotional eating is to fill your emotions rather than your stomach, but using food to managing your emotions will leave you feeling worse afterwards than you did before. Food may temporarily evoke pleasure but the new complications of difficulty managing weight and losing healthy coping skills or willpower will be more challenging to overcome than the initial emotion. It is important to understand what emotional eating is and then you can work on ways to stop emotional eating by identifying the triggers, finding other alternatives to “feed your feelings,” (Smith & Segal, 2014) pausing when cravings occur, and supporting yourself through healthy lifestyle changes and habits.

Emotional hunger comes on suddenly.

Emotional hunger craves specific comfort foods.

Emotional hunger often leads to mindless eating.

Emotional hunger isn't satisfied once you're full.

Emotional hunger isn't location in the stomach.

Emotional hunger often leads to regret, guilt, or shame (Smith & Segal, 2014).

Once you have identified your struggle as emotional eating, you must begin to look at the cause or thought process which led to the problem. It may be helpful to keep an emotional eating diary or a Mood and Food Journal. Include things like what you ate, what you felt before, during and after you ate, and what caused you to experience the initial emotion. Some common causes for emotional eating may include: stress, silencing emotions, boredom, feelings of emptiness, childhood habits, or social influences (Smith & Segal, 2014). Then we move onto finding other methods for dealing with your emotions. It's important to recognize the cause prior to focusing on alternatives because what will satisfy you when you are bored might not satisfy you when you are anxious. Use a mental health professional to help you with ideas for coping skills if you are struggling with ideas and what will work best for you.

A third helpful tip for stopping emotional eating is to learn to pause before you eat. This may even call for continued use for your journal even after you have identified your triggers. Take five minutes before you eat and perhaps you will gain an understanding of why you are about to eat so you can avoid it or you distract yourself and the craving may disappear. It's important to remember that even if you end up eating to use this as a learning tool to gain further insight to the issue. Also, “learn to accept your feelings- even the bad ones” (Smith & Segal, 2014). It is essential to open yourself up to your emotions and give yourself permission to experience your feelings- all of your feelings. We are aiming to help you deal with your emotions in a healthier way, not stop the emotions. Lastly, support yourself during these changes towards a healthier lifestyle; make time to exercise and relax and have fun connecting with others. You do not have to hide while dealing with this challenge and don't feel like you have to deal with it alone. Use your support system to help you through. As always, do not hesitate to reach out to a mental health professional if you are having difficulties managing emotional eating on your own. There is help for you!

Smith, M. & Segal, J. (2014). Emotional eating: How to recognize and stop emotional eating. Retrieved from http://www.helpguide.org/life/emotional_eating_stress_cravings.htm