

Mood and Food: Understand the Relationship

By MayoClinic.com

Unexpected changes at work, going out for dinner, dining at a buffet — all can trigger urges to overeat. Mood, however, also can trigger overeating. For some people, eating may be a way of suppressing or soothing negative emotions, such as stress, anger, anxiety, boredom, sadness and loneliness. These negative states can be caused by everything from major life events to simple day-to-day hassles. Though the "comfort foods" turned to in times of trouble might provide short-term fixes, they can lead to an unhealthy long-term habit of eating in response to negative feelings, not hunger.

Emotional eaters don't necessarily eat more foods, they eat more unhealthy foods, such as starchy, sweet, salty and fatty foods. Consequently, if stress or negative emotions are chronic, emotional eating can cause health problems such as weight gain and increased cardiovascular risk.

The good news is that if you're prone to emotional eating, you can regain control of your eating habits. By understanding the reasons why stress and negative emotions may cause you to crave those unhealthy snacks, and how you can avoid indulging your cravings, you're well on your way to avoiding a dietary disaster.

The connection between mood and food

Major life events — such as unemployment, health problems, divorce and a shortage of emotional support — and daily-life hassles — such as a difficult commute to work, bad weather, and changes in your normal routine — are both thought to trigger emotional eating. But why do negative emotions lead to overeating?

A physiologic connection

How your body reacts to mood and food may play a role. Research indicates that some foods might have seemingly addictive qualities for many people. When you eat palatable foods, such as chocolate, your body releases trace amounts of mood- and satisfaction-elevating opiates. That "reward" may reinforce a preference for foods that are most closely associated with specific feelings.

Scientists are also studying the possibility that sweet and fatty foods might actually relieve your anxiety. Preliminary research in animals indicates that during a stressful event, the adrenal gland increases production of stress hormones, including those known as glucocorticoids. When they're present at high-enough concentrations, glucocorticoids help restore calm by shutting down the stress-response system. But when stress is chronic, the system keeps moving. The stress hormones maintain the stress response, which encourages the formation of fat cells, and steers you in the direction of the unhealthy favorites you think you need to restore your emotional state.

A psychologic connection

From a mental standpoint, food also can be a distraction. If you're worried about an upcoming event, or rethinking a conflict from earlier in the day, eating comfort foods may distract you. But the distraction is only temporary. While you're eating, your thoughts may be focused on the pleasant taste of your comfort food. Unfortunately, when you're done overeating, your attention returns to your worries, and you may now bear the additional burden of feeling guilt about overeating.

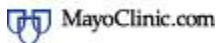
Managing mood and food: How to cope

In the long run, stress-related eating is an unhealthy coping strategy. If you think you have a clinical disorder, such as depression, see your doctor. If you think you're experiencing stress, follow these tips to help you avoid the unhealthy consequences of emotional eating:

- **Learn to recognize true hunger.** Is your hunger physical or mental? If you ate just a few hours ago and don't have a rumbling stomach, you're probably not really hungry. Give the craving a few minutes to pass.
- **Know your triggers.** For the next several days, write down what you eat, how much you eat, when you eat, how you're feeling and how hungry you are. Over time, you may see patterns emerge that reveal negative eating patterns and triggers to avoid.
- **Look elsewhere for comfort.** Instead of unwrapping a candy bar, take a walk, treat yourself to a movie or call a friend. If you think that stress relating to a particular event is nudging you toward the refrigerator, try talking to someone about it to distract yourself. Plan enjoyable events for yourself.
- **Don't keep unhealthy foods around.** Avoid having an abundance of starchy, high-fat, high-calorie comfort foods in the house. If you feel hungry or blue, postpone the shopping trip for a few hours so that these don't influence your decisions at the store.
- **Snack healthy.** If you feel the urge to eat between meals, choose a low-fat, low-calorie food, such as fresh fruit, pretzels or unbuttered popcorn. Or test low-fat, lower-calorie versions of your favorite foods to see if they satisfy your craving.
- **Eat a balanced diet.** If you're not getting enough calories to meet your energy needs, you may be more likely to give in to emotional eating. Try to eat at fairly regular times. Include foods from the basic groups in your meals. Emphasize whole grains, vegetables and fruits, as well as low-fat dairy products and lean protein sources. When you fill up on the basics, you're more likely to feel fuller, longer.
- **Exercise regularly.** Your mood is more manageable and your body can more effectively fight stress when it's fit and well rested.
- **Prevent relapse.** If you give in to emotional eating, forgive yourself and try to learn from it. Make a plan for how you can prevent it in the future.

Though strong emotions can trigger cravings for food, you can take steps to control those cravings. "Start by examining how negative moods and emotions affect your eating habits," says Matthew Clark, Ph.D., a psychologist at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn. "If you think you have an anxiety, depressive or other mood disorder, consult with your doctor about treatment options. If you think stress is playing a more prominent role, monitor your mood, plan stress-reducing activities and seek out social support."

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