



Eating Emotions: How to manage your mood to manage your food

Have you ever had a really dreadful day, and then craved escape in a big bowl of brussels sprouts? No? Our emotions have a huge impact on our food choices – choices that often do not include healthy foods, like vegetables, but comfort foods instead. Chocolate is calming. Ice cream is comforting. And fried chicken can be a best friend, at least for a moment.

When we are stressed, depressed, anxious, bored or lonely we can be triggered to eat. These non-mealtime munch fests can become patterns that make it difficult to achieve and maintain a healthy body. But there is good news! If we can learn what is eating *us*, we can learn better eating habits by not turning to food to soothe us. Begin making new choices now!

Here are five fundamental steps to help you manage your mood to manage your food.

Track your triggers

It is vital to recognize the feelings that lead to your food choices. Identify and label the emotions that make you psychologically hungry. What are the situations, moods or environments that cause you to overeat? Stress is a common trigger. Boredom can also cause overeating. Which is easier: sailing through the drive through for a quick, tasty French fry fix, or scheduling a healthy activity instead? Perhaps it's the anger or frustration from a fight with your spouse that triggers you. Or, it could be the depression and loneliness from not being connected to family or friends. Or, even the aggravation from being overweight in the first place. If you begin to track the triggers that cause you to reach for food (when you're not hungry) you'll become more aware of the negative outcomes of your choices, thus you'll be able to better handle the mood/food connection.

Know what your “hunger” is hiding

For many who are overweight, food is the drug of choice to relieve emotional discomfort. Food is an easily accessible alternative we use to mask problems like a broken heart, a grieving spirit, a frantic family or a lonely life. We can continually turn to combo meals to cope, but our waists get wider while our hungry hearts remains starved. Stuffing our mouths and emotions with food does not address our real issues. These could be issues from our past, such as an unresolved loss, or a present challenge, like a dissolving relationship. We can become so adept at denying or minimizing whatever pains us that we believe our problems with food are only problems about food. Until you acknowledge what your emotional hunger binges are attempting to hide, you will be stuck in an unhealthily (and hefty) state.

Remember what food is for

There is only one main reason why we should eat: because our body needs fuel! If you struggle with emotional eating you have likely become unable to discern physical and psychological hunger. Relearn what physical hunger truly is, and stop eating when you're satisfied, not when you're stuffed. Educate yourself about how the body uses food. For example, research how protein increases alertness,

carbohydrates increase calmness and how some fats are actually good for you. Food should not be something to be feared, or labeled as good or bad. Food can be enjoyed and even celebrated when it is not used as a punishment plan or escape tool. Before you eat an unplanned food, ask yourself if you are really hungry? If it has been only a short time since you last ate, chances are you aren't really hungry.

Choose no or low-calorie comforts

Stop munching and get moving! There are many ways you can manage feelings like sadness, stress and boredom that don't include huge calorie consumptions. Make a list of 10 things you can do when feeling this way. Physical activity produces endorphins, which boost your mood and energize you. A good night's sleep can also be a powerful mood booster. Call a friend, read book, take the dog for a walk or enjoy a relaxing bath. Simply relaxing can calm your body and your mind. Plus, you won't feel the guilt of your post pig out pity party! You will feel good about your choices, which will encourage you to do the same the next time you have a bad day.

Heal your hungry heart

Mindless eating is not only a bad habit that will pack on the pounds, it does not have the power to heal a broken heart or bring lasting joy to the depressed. A harmless plate of cookies can turn from an occasional treat for the family to an opportunity to gorge in an attempt to conceal troubling emotions. Eating for comfort brings a temporary "high" because it is so enjoyable and easy to obtain. Don't sabotage your best efforts to be healthy and lose weight by using cookies as your counselor. You deserve to be healthy, physically and emotionally. Identify your unmet needs, and be willing to put them on the table. Express your feelings to a trusted friend, or seek support through a professional counselor. Gain control of your eating and your life. The only way to heal a hungry heart is to first acknowledge that it's not about the food. It's about the mood. Your new life will be lighter in spirit and in pounds!

Centerstone (615) 460-HELP (4357)

About Centerstone

Centerstone, a not-for-profit organization, has provided a wide range of mental health and addiction services to people of all ages for more than 50 years. Through more than 60 facilities and 170 partnership locations across Middle Tennessee, Centerstone serves more than 50,000 children, adolescents, adults and seniors each year. Centerstone is accredited by The Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF). For more information about Centerstone, please call 888-291-4357 or visit www.centerstone.org.

About Susan Gillpatrick, MEd, LPC, CTS

Susan Gillpatrick, Centerstone Crisis Management Specialist, primarily works in the field with clients in critical incident response situations, and in Centerstone's wellness trainings and presentations. She is also responsible for planning and implementing marketing and growth strategies for Centerstone's Crisis Management Strategies.

Ms. Gillpatrick is a Licensed Professional Counselor, Certified Trauma Specialist, Certified Workplace Conflict Mediator, and Mental Health Service Provider in the state of Tennessee and a National Certified Counselor. She is also a member the American Counseling Association, the Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists, the Tennessee Mental Health Counseling Association, and the Middle Tennessee Employee Assistance Professionals Association. She is a frequent presenter at local and national conferences, and has had numerous articles published. She received her Master of Education degree in Human Development Counseling from Peabody College at Vanderbilt University.