Focus On You - Healthy Food Therapy: Eating for a Healthy Body and Mind

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Many of us, at some point or another, turn to food for reasons other than hunger. We might eat because we are bored, sad or stressed, or might turn to food when we’re happy and celebrating. You may have heard the expression “an emotional eater”, or heard certain foods described as being “comfort foods”.

While eating in this way from time to time isn’t always a bad thing, using food as your primary way of dealing with emotions isn’t healthy. Emotional eating doesn’t solve your problems, and could add feelings of guilt when you overdo it. Many of us may have grown up being comforted with food rather than talking about our feelings. Unless we become more aware of this pattern and what triggers us to turn to emotional eating or comfort foods, we often continue this pattern of eating into adulthood.

In contrast, good nutrition not only helps us feel our physical best, but is crucial to our mental health. Feeding our brains with a balanced diet may help us think more clearly, stay alert and help manage our stress and moods.

It is possible to curb emotional eating and make healthier food choices to promote the health of both your body and your mind.

Identify Emotional Eating

Learn to listen to your body to recognise true physical hunger. Signs of physical hunger could include hunger pangs, decreased energy or headache. If food looks good or smells good, but you don’t have physical signs of hunger, then you probably aren’t hungry.

At a glance

- It is possible to curb emotional eating and make healthier food choices to promote the health of both your body and your mind.
- Emotional hunger doesn’t know if you last ate 5 minutes or 5 hours ago.
You have to have specific foods. Natural hunger is typically satisfied by any food, including healthy choices. Emotional hunger is only satisfied by certain types of foods. These are usually foods that are high in sugar or fat and are highly processed such as crisps, cookies or ice cream.

You aren’t hungry, or keep eating after you’re full. Emotional hunger doesn’t know if you last ate 5 minutes or 5 hours ago. When eating emotionally, you may tend to keep eating after you are full. The good news is that you can train yourself to push your plate away when you begin to sense a feeling of fullness. It takes some time to be more aware of when we are full, so give yourself time to listen to your body so that you’ll know when you’ve eaten enough.

Your hunger is sudden. Natural hunger typically comes on gradually, and you are able to wait a while before eating. Emotional eating may be sudden and becomes all you can think about until you satisfy it.

Feelings of guilt. If you feel guilty after you eat something, it could be a sign of emotional eating. The feeling of guilt or embarrassment is especially present when vast amounts of food are consumed. You may not want to have others see you eat this way, so your emotional eating becomes a secret you keep from others.

Emotional eating often occurs because of how people respond to negative or stressful situations. Stress hormones can also increase cravings for sweet, salty or fatty foods. Instead of eating, try a relaxing activity you enjoy, such as yoga, meditation, taking a brisk walk or listening to music. These activities can release the “feel good” hormones which help us manage stress.

Distract yourself with a favourite hobby or activity, or make plans with a friend. Look for classes available in your community where you can learn a new skill or develop a new hobby. You may also enjoy the socialising, and could make some new friends.

Make sure you’re getting enough sleep. Sometimes we snack on unhealthy food simply because we’re exhausted and need an energy boost.