
Ways To Avoid Emotional Eating

Weight management is all about health. In a culture that has produced Barbie and waiflike images of male and female celebrities, what's needed is an accurate and realistic assessment of our body-image goals and the fortitude to carry out a healthy weight management plan.

Most people find themselves reaching for food at times when they clearly aren't hungry. Oftentimes we are not even aware of our emotions or stressors (or that we are eating in response to moods and emotions) until we get in tune with our feelings.

Stress, the blues, fear and guilt are normal parts of life. Chances are we can't fully rid ourselves of these unpleasant feelings, but we can learn to deal with them more effectively. Our objective reasoning can tell us that eating unhealthy foods isn't relieving our stress or solving our emotional problems. Here are some ways to help change our cues for habitual and emotional eating.

PICK JUST ONE OR TWO BEHAVIORS YOU WANT TO CHANGE, THEN OBSERVE. Do you reach for food when you're stressed? When you're tired? See if you can find what triggers you to eat. Write down how you were feeling before, during and after you had food. Knowing your patterns and habits can help you find solutions.

STOCK THE PANTRY WITH HEALTHY FOODS. Instead of jumping on the diet-of-the-week bandwagon, experts advise eating a diet with 50 to 65 percent carbohydrate (emphasizing whole grains, legumes, fruits and veggies), 20 to 25 percent protein and the remainder from mostly unsaturated fat (olive oil over butter or meat fat, for example). High-fiber foods will fill you up and are not very calorie-dense. They also take a while to chew, giving your body time to signal you that it's time to put your fork down when you've had enough. Instead of potato chips or crackers containing hydrogenated oils, opt for almonds, peanuts, soy nuts, air-popped popcorn sprinkled with nutritional yeast or mixed seasonings, carrots, grapes, pretzels or other non-fried snacks.

SET A REALISTIC, SPECIFIC, EASILY MEASURABLE GOAL. The more concrete you can get, the easier it is to facilitate change. For example, don't say: "I will never overeat again." A more helpful goal would be: "I will think about what I am eating and decrease my stress eating to no more than 4 stress snacks a week." Find other ways to deal with the stress -- like listening to music or keeping a journal. Break a big goal up into smaller weekly goals.

EAT MINDFULLY. This one seems easy, yet few of us do it in our multi-tasking frenzy. For many people, eating while driving, watching TV or working at the computer is practically second nature. But these distractions take away from our enjoyment and awareness of what we're eating, often contributing to eating too fast and overeating. Make a point of sitting at the table, turning off the TV and computer and setting aside your work for mealtimes.

Many overweight people feel they have to sneak their food -- or that they don't deserve to enjoy their food. It's better to sit and really enjoy some of what you really want than to sneak it or end up depriving yourself until you end up bingeing out of frustration.

PLAN AHEAD. The amount of planning you do for the week ahead can make or break your healthy eating patterns. Have healthy snacks on hand and bring sandwiches if you'll be away from home at lunch or staying at the office late. Determine whether you'll be walking by a store, where you can buy yogurt and/or fruit during a snack or lunch break.

KEEP A TEMPTATION BASKET IN THE KITCHEN. Include a good book, your favorite CD, some herbal tea and a list of friends you can call to help talk you out of your urge to indulge. This way you are prepared when the craving strikes.

REWARD YOURSELF ALONG THE WAY. Don't just focus on the end results. Take time to acknowledge the accomplishments along the way. That's the beauty of having "mini-goals." Plan your rewards ahead of time. It can be time by yourself, a warm bath, a massage, a movie or a good book -- whatever it is that will give you something to look forward to!

So, forge ahead and be smart and disciplined about your diet and exercise habits. You too can lose that weight for good.
