



Comfort Eating: Just How Good Do You Want to Feel?

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Emotional eating is the practice of consuming large quantities of food -- usually "comfort" or junk foods -- in response to feelings instead of hunger. Experts estimate that 75% of overeating is caused by emotions. Many of us learn that food can bring comfort, at least in the short-term. As a result, we often turn to food to heal emotional problems or take away discomfort. Eating to self soothe becomes a habit preventing us from learning skills that can effectively resolve our emotional distress.

Depression, boredom, loneliness, chronic anger, anxiety, frustration, stress, problems with interpersonal relationships and poor self-esteem can result in overeating and unwanted weight gain. There are 2 types of emotional eating in which people engage:

1. Deprivation-sensitive binge eating: appears to be the result of weight loss diets or periods of restrictive eating (yoyo dieters)
2. Addictive or dissociative binge eating: process of self-medicating or self-soothing with food unrelated to prior restricting (have you ever eaten a whole packet of something, before you realised it was gone?)

By identifying what triggers our emotional eating, we can substitute more appropriate techniques to manage our emotional problems and take food and weight gain out of the equation.

So why are you eating?

Your first step is figuring out the situations or feelings that trigger emotional eating. Do you eat more at work because of stress or boredom? Do you eat more at parties or other social situations because you're nervous or anxious? Do you eat when you feel bad about yourself because you missed a workout? Do you eat for something to do when you are bored?

Figure out what triggers your eating by keeping a journal. Keep track of what and when you eat and write down how you were feeling at the time. Were you eating in response to true physical

hunger or to an emotional situation?

Situations and emotions that trigger us to eat fall into five main categories.

1. Social. Eating when around other people. For example, excessive eating can result from being encouraged by others to eat; eating to fit in; arguing; or feelings of inadequacy around other people.
2. Emotional. Eating in response to boredom, stress, fatigue, tension, depression, anger, anxiety, loneliness as a way to "fill the void" or in response to feelings arising from memories of past negative experiences.
3. Situational. Eating because the opportunity is there. For example, at a restaurant, seeing an advertisement for a particular food, passing by a bakery. Eating may also be associated with certain activities such as watching TV, going to the movies or a sporting event.
4. Thoughts. Eating as a result of negative self-worth or making excuses for eating. For example, scolding oneself for looks or a lack of will power.
5. Physiological. Eating in response to physical cues. For example, increased hunger due to skipping meals or eating to cure headaches or other pain.

Using your "Subconscious Mind" for Emotional Eating and Shape Change

Have a think right now: why is it that you want to stop emotionally eating? You might immediately know, or you might have to think for sometime. Finish this sentence out loud: When I stop eating in response to my emotions, I will

Your answer/s will give you some insight into how you are motivated.

If you are motivated towards pleasurable outcomes, you might have said things like:

- When I stop eating in response to my emotions I will be able to buy clothes 'off the rack' in the shops
- When I stop eating in response to my emotions I will be happy

If you are motivated away from negative outcomes your answers may reflect:

- When I stop eating in response to my emotions I will not be uncomfortable in my clothes anymore
- When I stop eating in response to my emotions I will be able

to throw away my 'fat' clothes

You have probably noticed the patterns here. Moving towards pleasurable outcomes or away from a negative one, affects how we think, feel and behave. You might find that you have a combination of moving towards some outcomes and away from others. This is fine too. More often than not, we are primarily subconsciously motivated in one direction.

Motivation has also been shown to exist either as an internal characteristic or as an external factor in people in general. Internal motivation is linked to neurological circuitry in the left prefrontal lobe; the feelings of accomplishment, passion for work, excitement in our day all link to the left prefrontal cortex (Davidson et al. 2000). It is this area of the brain, which governs motivating behaviour. It discourages pessimistic feelings and encourages action. The reality is that some people naturally possess a high level of this internal motivation; those who focus on the internal feelings of satisfaction they will attain despite any difficulties they face along the way. However others require more than this.

External motivation is any external influence or stimuli to generate positive behaviour. These might include monetary rewards such as bonuses, tangible recognition or honour, prizes, or other incentives. The reality is, despite such rewards motivating behaviour in the short term, it has been shown that no amount of bonuses or acknowledgment will inspire people to use their fullest potential to keep moving towards their goals (Goleman et al. 2002). So what does it take?

You might have already noticed with exercise that no matter how many personal trainers you hire, how many motivational exercise tapes you purchase or classes you attend, eventually you lose interest and go back to your old behaviour. This is because all of those things are forms of *external* motivation. There is nothing wrong with them – some people thrive on external motivation and do very well with it. However, sometimes your behaviour does drop off when you cease getting the drive from an external source. Let's face it, if you had a personal trainer at your door every single day for the rest of your life and a personal chef in the kitchen preparing nutritious balanced meals forever, then yes, you would be motivated to lose weight and become fitter. Such fulltime assistance is not a reality for most of us.

Sometimes people FIND the internal source of motivation they need to lose weight from an external source and this can help them get started. Here's Mercedes' story.

Mercedes had tried to lose weight for years. She was a clerk in the local library and thoroughly enjoyed her work and her food. She noticed over years of living a fairly sedentary lifestyle, with little exercise and a whole lot of reading in her spare time that the pounds had crept on. She was an accomplished cook and took pleasure in preparing meals for herself out of gourmet magazines from the library. She wasn't really worried about her weight but it was always in the back of her mind that she should do something about it. It wasn't until she noticed a regular visitor to the library every evening that she paid attention.

Jon was studying for his final exams in accountancy and because he still lived at home with his rowdy younger brothers and sisters, he began taking to the library every evening for the peace and quiet. He found Mercedes to be very knowledgeable and helpful with finding him necessary reference programs and they struck up a friendly rapport. Mercedes noticed that she started to look forward to her time every evening chatting to Jon and after the first compliment he made about her hair, she proceeded to take more time with her appearance. Jon was really the first man who had ever noticed her as a woman. Unbeknownst to him, Mercedes began watching her meals and even started parking her car further from work to get some exercise each day, in the hope of slimming down.

Mercedes and Jon remained good friends and while nothing particularly romantic ever happened between them, Mercedes felt inspired to continue her grooming routine and eventually met her future husband while power walking on the weekend. He had lived two doors from her for years and they had never noticed each other!

Are you motivated toward a reward? Or away from a painful outcome?

Your subconscious mind is actually equipped to lead you towards something you want, rather than away from something you don't want.

The same happens when we need to achieve a goal such as weight loss – we need to look where we are going. When focussing on losing weight most people are focussed on wanting to move away from what they don't want, or the negative situation. Rather than focus on wanting to lose weight to move away from your current position, focus on the positives of becoming slim, healthy or fitter. This is moving towards the positive rather than moving away from

the negative.

Here is a simple exercise which will prove to you your subconscious is on the alert 24 hours a day: on the way home today, choose a make, model and colour of vehicle- anything will do. Start to think about it consciously. And then start to look around and see how many you can count on the way home. Really look hard – you will find them everywhere! How was it that on the way to work you didn't notice any? You were not tuned in, that's all.

Dr Peta Stapleton and Terri Sheldon are two well known Australian psychologists with 35 years of combined clinical experience. They have developed the SlimMinds Program that teaches the latest effective psychological techniques to break out of that YoYo failure cycle that so often occurs with traditional weight loss programs. See www.slimminds.com

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