

# Nurture Your Emotions Without Excess Calories

Healthy eating and exercise helps keep more than your weight balanced, it can also help your mood. For occasions when your emotions seem to get out of control, the following exercise can help you build awareness and plan appropriate action. Perhaps you've notice that you occasionally reach for food, and you are not really hungry? Most people, when they pay attention, notice that they eat for many reasons other than that empty stomach rumbling feeling. Some of your eating is emotionally driven. Listed here are some of the emotions that can trigger eating. Check off any that are triggers for you or list others:

- |   |   |                                  |  |
|---|---|----------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anger          | <input type="checkbox"/> Pain               | <input type="checkbox"/> Comfort | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety/Nervousness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Happiness      | <input type="checkbox"/> Sadness/Depression | <input type="checkbox"/> Reward  | <input type="checkbox"/> Procrastination     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Guilt          | <input type="checkbox"/> Celebration        | <input type="checkbox"/> Fear    | <input type="checkbox"/> Insecurity          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Loneliness     | <input type="checkbox"/> Disappointment     | <input type="checkbox"/> Boredom | <input type="checkbox"/> Fatigue             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stress/Tension | <input type="checkbox"/> Jealousy           | <input type="checkbox"/> Grief   | <input type="checkbox"/> Distraction         |

OTHER:

How do you know the difference between your physical hunger and emotional hunger?

Answer the following statements as they apply to you:	YES	NO
One minute you aren't thinking about food, and the next minute you're starving.		
You need to have a specific food to be satisfied; no other food will do.		
Do you feel "hunger" in your mouth, rather than your stomach?		
You can't wait. You must ease your discomfort with food, and now.		
You are mindlessly eating—your hand automatically goes back into the bag of chips again and again and soon it is all gone!		
Even though you have finished a plateful of food, you go back for more, even if you notice you are full.		
Eating makes you "feel good," but you have a sense of guilt and need to atone for the calorie intake.		
Do you routinely "treat" yourself with food?		
Do you eat more when you are alone?		

The more "yes" answers you have, the more likely you are an emotional eater. Eating for reasons other than real hunger leads to unwanted calories, and they can add up quickly.

When you feel uncomfortable you may tend to use food to provide a soothing effect. This is both a learned behavior ("My mother always gave me candy when I fell and hurt myself.") and a biological response. Certain foods, particularly carbohydrates, calm the nerves biochemically. And there are many tasty carbohydrates ready to be gobbled to take emotional pain away. Learn to cope differently with your feelings and focus on eating for the pleasure of satisfying actual hunger, rather than by habit and emotion triggers. And remember that eating multiple small meals over the course of the day can also help you keep control and help keep your emotions in check.

**But HOW do you overcome emotional eating?** Consider that feelings are messages that tell you what you need. When you begin to allow yourself to feel and understand the emotion rather than smother it with food, you can discover other ways to nurture and comfort yourself without turning to food.

The first step is to identify the feeling. No doubt by now you have worked on recognizing your hunger. So, if you check in with your stomach and are not hungry but have the urge to eat, it's a perfect time to examine why you are thinking about food right now.

### ACTIVITY: Create an Emotional Eating Action Plan

Look back at your food records to see the feelings that you listed alongside what you ate. Can you notice any patterns? Besides hunger, are there other feelings you have written down? List them here:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Choose one of these feelings and think about the last time you were eating when you weren't really hungry. Now try to take a step back and use this relaxation technique to focus on the feelings.

Take slow deep breaths for a minute or two. Focus on the feeling, then let it fade.

Acknowledging your feelings rather than swallowing is a very therapeutic step. Telling yourself, "*Oh yes, this is just me being anxious. Eating won't solve it; I just need to relax. I think I will put on some music,*" or do something else: take a walk, try a crossword puzzle, or call a friend.

Take some time now—when you aren't emotional—to list a few of your triggers and which of your needs were not being met. Write out a new Action Plan and keep this as a handy reference to pull out when your next emotional eating episode occurs. Finding satisfying non-food coping mechanisms can let you break old habits of soothing feelings and meeting needs with eating excess calories.

Emotional Trigger	Your Need to Be Met	What I Can Do Instead
EXAMPLE: Boredom	To be with people	1. Call a neighbor to take a walk 2. Go to the mall and people watch 3. Chat room on internet 4. Sign up for a evening exercise class

**Other relaxation techniques** can be useful for finding, feeling, and fading the feelings: perhaps a leisurely walk, yoga, journaling, contemplation with gentle music, imagery and visualization or a restful nap. Make a list of three techniques you will try this week to help you feel encouraged to develop helpful, not hurtful, coping techniques.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_ 3. \_\_\_\_\_

### Impulse Eating

Sometimes just the smell or sight of food you like to eat, even in a picture, can trigger your appetite. Remember the last time seeing a chocolate bar at the grocery check-out made your mouth water? Rather than emotional, these are impulse or mindless eating responses. For these situations try using some positive self-talk to move you past this temptation. If you are actually hungry, remember to choose a less calorie dense option like a serving of fruit or a handy protein nutrition bar.