

# Stress and Emotional Eating

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Everyday life can bring about stress at any time. Whether it is a deadline at work or just trying to get all your errands run before the morning rush, we all face stress, and how each of us deals with it is a personal choice. Emotional eating is a way many people cope with negative feelings such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, stress, and boredom. We consume unhealthy foods or unhealthy amounts of food to hide negative thoughts and feelings. Knowing what causes us to turn to food in a stressful time is a key in preventing emotional eating patterns. It is also important for us to be able to recognize emotional eating and how to deal with it.

## What Is Stress?

Stress is a general term for any stimulus, either psychological or physiological, that requires a response or adaptation. The human body faces stress daily and even requires a certain amount of stress in order to thrive. There are both good and bad forms of stress, though too much stress of any kind can be damaging to the body.

## Signs of Stress

*Some signs of stress:*

- Insomnia or sleeping disturbances
- Headaches
- Gastrointestinal upset
- Weight gain or loss
- Muscle tension and cramping
- Fatigue
- Nervousness or anxiety
- Problems with memory and concentration
- Increased irritability
- Overreactions
- Reproductive problems
- Chest pain

## Responses to Stress

Everyone reacts to stress in his or her own way. There are both positive and negative ways of dealing with stress. Positive responses include choosing an enjoyable hobby or sport, physical activity, or joining a support group to

handle stress. Negative responses include substance abuse, overeating or emotional eating, skipping meals, or not eating at all. Negative responses to stress can be detrimental to your health, both physically and mentally.

## What Is Emotional Eating?

Emotional eating is consuming foods in response to emotions, especially negative emotions, instead of hunger. These are common signs of emotional eating:

- Obsessing about food
- Using food as a reward
- Binge eating
- Impulsive eating
- Out-of-control consumption
- Inability to stop eating/continuing to eat when full
- Hiding evidence of eating/eating in private
- Feelings of guilt or remorse after eating
- Disconnection from physiological signals of hunger and satiety
- Weight fluctuation
- Inability to recognize the reason for eating
- Eating at a faster rate than normal

## Risks Associated with Emotional Eating

Indulging in food can make people feel guilty and disgusted with their eating behavior and thus affect the way they interact socially. We often use mealtimes as a way to socialize, but if we don't feel comfortable when consuming food, isolation and depression can occur. In addition to emotional and social problems, emotional eating can lead to overweight and obesity, creating or contributing to other psychological problems. Feelings of rejection and insecurity brought about by a weight-conscious society can be overwhelming.

Not only can emotional eating affect people mentally, but it can also have detrimental effects on health. Many turn to "comfort foods" that are high in fat, salt, and calories. Consuming too many of these foods can lead not only to weight gain but also may lead to many health risks including the following:

- High cholesterol (hypercholesterolemia)

- High blood pressure (hypertension)
- Increased risk of various cardiovascular diseases, stroke, and myocardial infarction
- Skeletal and muscular problems
- Increased risk of certain types of cancers
- Respiratory dysfunction
- Diabetes
- Sleeping disorders

## Avoiding Emotional Eating

A simple way to avoid emotional eating is to reduce the amount and cause of stress in your life. You can reduce stress by using time management, prioritizing events, taking short breaks from work or daily activities, and learning relaxation techniques. Recognizing that stress is present and learning how to cope with these stresses is a way of preventing yourself from turning to emotional eating. Remember, you cannot always avoid stress. If you cannot avoid stress, you have to learn constructive or positive methods of dealing with it.

You can avoid emotional eating by identifying other activities you enjoy. Being involved in a hobby or sport can distract you from constantly thinking of food and consumption. The physical activity from a hobby or sport can also help increase energy expenditure and prevent weight gain. Less physically active hobbies include reading, writing, solving puzzles, scrapbooking, photography, or model building. Interacting with people, family, and friends can not only keep you entertained but also help with low self esteem issues. Support groups are available to those who are unable to cope and deal with stress on their own.

## Dealing with Emotional Eating

We all know life would be easier if we didn't have problems like emotional eating. However, these problems do exist, and we are faced with the dilemma of what to do about emotional eating. We need to first recognize the problem. At one time or another, all of us eat for emotional or social reasons instead of the feeling of hunger. Occasional emotional eating is generally not a serious concern, but when it becomes a habit or a common occurrence, it can become a health concern that needs to be addressed.

To recognize the problem of emotional eating, examine the signs of stress and emotional eating mentioned above. If you can identify one or more of these signs, you may have a problem with emotional eating. Another useful

method for identifying emotional eating is to keep a food journal of what you eat, why you are eating, where you are eating, when you are eating, and how you are feeling when you're eating for several days. If you are consistently eating for reasons other than hunger and are suffering from signs of emotional eating, you should consult a health professional.

Significant problems with stress, including emotional eating, are best dealt with by health professionals. These are complex problems that can vary greatly from person to person. However, most people have less severe problems with emotional eating and can often overcome this problem without expensive treatment. Here are some ways of resolving less severe problems with emotional eating:

- Substitute other activities for eating when you are not hungry
- Reduce stress in your life
- Find a support group or accountability partner
- Choose healthy snacks and meals while avoiding "junk" foods

## Children and Emotional Eating

When it comes to children and stress, we are often guilty of encouraging emotional eating. Parents and caregivers frequently offer favorite foods to children when they are upset to cheer them up. Using food as a coping mechanism can lead to emotional eating later in life. Talking with your children about their problems and the issues they face can help them choose healthier ways of dealing with stress. Another common occurrence is using food as a reward. If a child does something good, the parent offers a favorite food or treat. This can be harmful, because children begin to associate positive events with overindulgence.

## Summary

There are many different causes of stress in our lives. Some of this stress is good and healthy. Much of the stress we deal with leads to unhealthy habits such as emotional eating. It is important to learn how to recognize signs and sources of stress in your life. It is also important to recognize how you are coping with stress. There are many positive ways to cope with stress, but, we do not always use them. Learning to avoid emotional eating patterns can greatly improve your health and wellbeing.