

# When You Eat Emotionally

When you eat emotionally, you are using food to cope with your emotions rather than to satisfy genuine hunger. Early in life, food is often used to soothe, comfort, reward, and console. Later, you may automatically turn to food when you are feeling bored, angry, depressed, anxious, stressed, or frustrated, or when you have emotional needs that are not being met. In the short term, this coping mechanism can be very effective, but if you rely on it too often, the habit can be difficult to break — especially for people who struggle with their weight. Learning how to balance your emotional relationship with food is crucial to your long-term success with healthy eating and living.

People don't always know how to identify their emotional needs — or how to get those needs met once they have been identified. For example, many clients tell us that they eat out of boredom. If boredom is truly the eating trigger, then clearly caloric consumption is not the unfulfilled need. The *true* need that is going unfulfilled might be the need for activity. Such clients need to tackle boredom by finding something to do. When we ask our clients for suggestions on how to meet the *need* for activity when they are bored, they invariably come up with great ideas: read a book, take a walk, knit, work around the house. These are all perfect matches if the trigger is truly boredom.

However, it is also easy at times to inaccurately identify your true need or trigger. With further analysis, our clients often realize that boredom is really just loneliness in disguise. If they are experiencing loneliness, then none of the activities listed above will fulfill the *true* need, which is companionship, or at a minimum, contact with other people. Therefore, calling a friend, going out and people watching, or taking a walk to visit some neighbors would be better choices than activities like reading a book or knitting.

The better you get at identifying your "true need" in the moment, the better chance you have of identifying the most effective coping strategy to fulfill that need.

Of course, many of our clients have difficulty identifying and understanding their emotional needs. Sometimes it takes practice to better understand and integrate your emotional experiences, as opposed to trying to ignore them or stuff them away with food. Here are some strategies that may help. We sometimes call these emotion-regulation strategies:

## **Practice Emotional Awareness**

*Connect.* Take a deep breath and close your eyes. Breathe comfortably, taking gentle and full breaths. Tune in to your body and focus on the sensations you are experiencing. Allow your stomach to rise, and then your chest. Notice your inhalation flowing past the tip of your nose and filling your lungs. Turn your attention to how your body feels in the moment without judging or interpreting. Just focus on the moment.

*Observe.* When you are relaxed and feeling in tune with yourself, ask yourself the following kinds of questions: What's going on? What am I sensing? What am I feeling? What am I thinking? Try to do this while maintaining the relaxation generated in the previous step.

*Evaluate.* Continuing in this relaxed state, think about the answers to the questions you have just posed, and based on those answers, try to tune in to your true needs.

Keep in mind that you can do this at any time throughout the day. It only takes a moment or two.

## **Cope in the Moment**

Expressing your emotions may seem strange if you're the kind of person who is not used to "indulging" yourself by getting *emotional*, but it is a positive and essential part of a healthy, balanced life. There are times when emotional expression involves letting yourself cry when you are sad, or sharing your feelings with someone close to you — maybe one of your supporters. Writing in your journal is another great way to express your feelings. Exercise, or another physical

activity, such as taking a walk or dancing, may also relieve emotional tension. And finally, stress management techniques, like deep breathing and meditation exercises, are excellent tools.

### **Pinpoint the Trigger**

In addition to trying to learn as much as you can about your emotional state in the moment, it is important to identify emotional triggers. Think about what triggered your desire to eat: Was it a specific event or a conflict? A memory? Did you have a distressing thought or series of thoughts? When you pinpoint the trigger, analyze why it had that effect on you and how you might respond to it differently, without resorting to food.

### **Confront the Situation**

Ask yourself if you need to eat. If the answer is no, then try to figure out what it is you really need. Perhaps you need to take a break from whatever you're doing and relax. Maybe you need some cheering up. It could be affection you crave, or positive affirmation. It could be the need for resolution or closure. Then again, maybe the issue is deeper than that and requires you to improve your assertiveness skills or set better boundaries. If the problem seems too big for you to handle on your own, consider seeking the help of a professional, such as a psychologist or other qualified therapist.

### **Consider the Alternatives**

There are alternatives to emotional eating. Fall back on the coping skills you've been developing in this program. Plan the steps you can take to change, accept, or cope with the emotional and unplanned eating urges you're experiencing. And work toward developing a healthy emotional state.

Finally, remember that it takes practice to identify your true needs and emotional triggers; but as you get better and better at it, you'll be able to apply all of these skills in the moment and lead a healthier life.