Emotional Eating: How to Cope

If you raid the fridge when you're stressed or upset, that's called emotional eating. Emotional eating affects most people from time to time. But regularly letting your feelings guide your food intake can affect your health.

Sadness, boredom, and other negative feelings can drive emotional eating. Emotional eating includes eating a whole container of ice cream after a breakup. Or devouring a bag of potato chips when you're home alone on a Saturday night. But happy events can lead to it, too. Many people overeat at joyous events, such as parties and weddings.

More serious conditions can be linked to emotional eating. One is binge-eating disorder. This is marked by eating very large amounts of food well after you already feel full.

Eating more food than your body needs can have dangerous results. People who eat for emotional reasons often gain too much weight. This puts them at greater risk for type 2 diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, obesity, and cancer. Excessive eating has emotional consequences as well. These include feeling guilty or embarrassed afterward.

Strategies to deal with emotional eating

Here are steps you can take to stop emotional eating episodes and break the cycle:

- **Learn to recognize hunger.** Next time you reach for a snack, ask yourself what's driving it. If you are truly hungry, you'll notice physical symptoms, such as a growling stomach. Other less obvious hunger cues include grouchiness and trouble focusing. If you don't have those signs, you likely don't need to eat right then.

- **Keep a journal.** Take the time to create a mood and food journal. Write down what and when you eat each day. Also include the feelings you were having at the time and if you were truly hungry. You may find that certain feelings, such as anger or sadness, lead to your overeating. Once you see these triggers, you can learn healthier ways to deal with them. For example, if you have stress, take a walk around the block. Don't try to relieve it with food.

- **Build a support network.** Having friends and family around you who support your efforts to change your eating habits can improve your chances of success. It may also be helpful to join a support group. This will help you meet other people with similar problems and learn better ways of coping. One such group is the 12-step program Overeaters Anonymous.

- **Find other interests.** Finding an activity that you enjoy can increase self-confidence, which is often poor in emotional eaters. Examples might be yoga, playing a musical instrument, volunteering, or painting. You may find that your eating is driven by boredom. If that's so, then a new interest can fill your hours and make you less likely to look to food for emotional satisfaction.

- **Get help if needed**. If you can't control emotional eating on your own, think about getting professional help to change your behavior. A form of psychotherapy called cognitive behavioral therapy can help. It can teach you to change your eating habits and deal with unpleasant emotions in a better way. Medicines, including antidepressants and appetite suppressants, may also help. Talk with your healthcare provider to learn about more treatment choices.