

Healthy Living

Patient Information from the American Chiropractic Association

Stress, Emotional Eating and Weight

Keeping a healthy weight—and especially losing weight—is not easy for many reasons. For one, easy access to extremely tasty high-calorie foods pushes many to overeat. Living with stress—a common source of negative emotions—also makes it difficult to keep healthy habits. In fact, according to www.webmd.com, up to 75 percent of overeating is driven by emotions.

Stress in particular has the power to push people toward overeating and other unhealthy behaviors. Research shows that stress forces people—particularly those who usually restrain their eating—to eat more and to choose high-fat foods over healthier ones. The high-calorie foods serve as self-medication, producing a relief from negative emotions.

Of course, the relief is only temporary—the effect of chocolate, for example, disappears after only three minutes, according to studies. However, because the food or beverage reduces a negative emotion, even temporarily, we tend to turn to it again next time we experience the same emotion.

Not all food works, though. When sad, disappointed, irritable or anxious, we don't crave carrots or celery. Instead, we turn to ice cream, chips, cookies or chocolate. Research shows the palatability of these foods may affect brain chemistry. Yet, food only numbs the feelings—without resolving underlying causes. And, by adding inches to our waistlines, we also pile guilt onto the mix.

Become Aware of Your Habits

The first step to conquering emotional eating is identifying your bad habits. Do you find yourself eating when you are not really hungry or when you are in a certain mood?

The next step is to pinpoint the triggers. Some emotional eating is caused by negative emotions—being bored, irritated, upset or stressed out. Certain thinking patterns, such as “I had a bad day at work; let me treat myself” or “I am overweight already, so what harm will



one cookie do?” also push people to overeat. And unhealthy behavior patterns, such as stocking the pantry with tempting and unhealthy food, can also contribute to the problem.

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To establish your patterns of emotional eating, write down the foods you eat and the accompanying feelings and thoughts. Record:

- the times you eat and drink
- the types and quantities of foods and beverages
- your hunger rating (on a scale of 0 to 10)
- situations preceding eating and any notable emotions.

Forming Healthy Habits

Depending on the triggers, your strategy will differ. For some, learning to recognize the physical hunger may be needed. Ask yourself, “What exactly would feel good in my body now? Is it something hot, cold, sweet, crunchy or mushy?” Narrow the food down without judging it good or bad. Learn to trust your body.

Those with unhealthy thinking patterns need help to identify the patterns and “refashion” the thinking. For example, instead of deciding that an extra cookie won’t matter, you may say to yourself, “I’m trying to keep a healthy weight—so the cookie may make a difference. Why don’t I eat something healthier?” While it may sound forced in the beginning, over time you can change the way you think.

If you use food as a reward, a stress reliever or a distraction, try brainstorming and developing a list of healthier, non-food-related coping activities, such as reading, doing Sudoku, exercising, breathing techniques, or meditation or massage. Keep a written list of the most effective coping activities handy—to turn to in times of intense emotions, when it may be hard to think clearly.

Maintaining Motivation

As with any other habit, emotional eating takes motivation, time and practice to break. Get support from your doctor of chiropractic and other health care providers you visit.

Find what will inspire you to form healthy habits. For many people, appearance, health and well-being serve as meaningful motivators—but they may need to be spelled out into practical terms, such as an outfit you want to wear, a health problem you want to avoid or an activity you want to do. Take some time to verbalize it in detail.

Your doctor of chiropractic can help you find specific foods and techniques that will help you—and give you detailed homework. Once you start a new program, remind yourself about your reasons to keep weight off to help yourself stay on track. ■

Reducing Stress

The following strategies can also help lessen the effects of stress on your health and improve stress tolerance:

- Think positively to lessen the negative effects of stress on your health.
- Get out and enjoy nature.
- Try aromatherapy, or smelling the essential oils of plants, to unwind after a stressful day.
- Relax with a cup of tea.
- Laugh it off. Humor relieves stress and anxiety and prevents depression, helping put your troubles in perspective.
- Build a support system to help you cope with stressful events.
- Listen to music.
- Try meditation to calm your mind.
- Get a massage.
- Give exercise a shot to relieve stress and get into good physical shape.



For more information on prevention and wellness, or to find a doctor of chiropractic near you, go to the Patient Information section on ACA’s Web site at www.acatoday.org or call 800-986-4636.

Nataliya Schetchikova, PHD, Writer