



Learn New Habits to Break Emotional Eating Patterns

The keys are identifying what triggers your emotional eating and adopting practical strategies to respond more healthfully to it.

Stress can trigger unhealthy snacking patterns—like reaching for cookies. Instead, you can grab a handful of baby carrots or a portion of nuts.

You feel stressed out. You are bored. Or you are angry at your spouse. So you walk a short distance to the fridge, swing open the door and look for a solution. Is it the leftover tapioca pudding? A slab of last night's lasagna? That pint of premium ice cream in the freezer?

Trigger, craving, action—this is the dynamic of emotional eating. It's a potent trio because it taps the brain's powerful ability to form deeply ingrained habits based on repeated experience. Using food to extinguish emotional states or "triggers" can lead to weight gain and unhealthy eating patterns.

"It's just the way the human brain learns by association," says Susan B. Roberts, PhD, director of Tufts' HNRCA Energy Metabolism Laboratory. "And some of us form these unfortunate associations between emotional triggers and eating unhealthy food."

But the brain is also very good at learning new strategies. "Once you've got the triggers identified, then you can work out what you are going to do instead," Roberts says. "Breaking down a dysfunctional habit really means pasting a new habit over the top of the bad one."

Trigger Points: An emotional eating habit forms when a stimulus connects to a behavior. "In the beginning you do it by accident," Roberts says. "You happen to have chocolate when you're stressed and it makes you feel better. Then your brain forms these connections and they can be hard to get rid of." So to start, spend some time observing yourself as you slip into the emotional eating behavior. What kicks off the process?

Stress is not the only trigger for emotional eating. Other possibilities include anxiety, anger, loneliness, depression, fear, procrastination, or boredom. Even positive emotions, like excitement or desire, can be triggers.

"Thinking about triggers is a way of getting out of the 'autopilot' state of mind that leads to emotional eating," says Debra Safer, MD, an associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the Stanford University Medical Center.

Once the autopilot is turned off, you can start to develop healthier responses to cravings, like substituting healthy snacks for unhealthy foods and using music or exercise to relax.

Reserving Judgment: Safer conducts research to develop better ways to treat her patients at the Stanford Adult Eating and Weight Disorders Program. She uses an approach called dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), which was developed in the late 1980s by Marsha M. Linehan, a psychology researcher at the University of Washington.

"The key is not to be judgmental about the problem, because that does not help," Safer says. "Accepting it is a lot of the solution." That's because self criticism leads to discomfort that can trigger more emotional eating.

Roberts also points to the importance of not judging yourself harshly. “If you find that what you planned to do as your substitute behavior and find it does not work, it’s not that you’re hopeless and it’s never going to work,” Roberts says. “It’s just that the substitute you tried wasn’t the right substitute. Just try to keep at it to find something that will work for you.”

Take Charge!

To short circuit your emotional eating, identify what triggers the behavior and adopt practical strategies to divert to healthier foods and habits. Here are some strategies:

- ▶ **Substitute:** Have substitutes at hand for your “go to” emotional eating foods. Portion out handfuls of baby carrots or apple slices in plastic baggies and keep them in the front of the fridge where you can grab them quickly. And keep a bowl of fresh fruit on the kitchen counter or dining room table.
- ▶ **Chew Gum:** Keep some flavored chewing gums at hand, preferably sugarless versions. These can help because they involve chewing, an essential part of the eating experience.
- ▶ **Relax:** Some people find having a hot shower or a soak in a tub can be helpful. Another strategy is creating a playlist or CD of your favorite music. Pop in your earbuds or slip on the headphones and relax into the music until your cravings subside.
- ▶ **Be Mindful:** Meditation-based mindfulness training, widely available, helps you to become more aware of your eating triggers and behaviors, enjoy your food more, and stop when you are satiated. Inexpensive smart phone apps are available to learn mindful eating—or you could take a mindfulness class at a local meditation center or adult education program.
- ▶ **Exercise:** Going out for a walk or jog can be helpful. Others may find relief with yoga or tai chi. Or go to your health club.
- ▶ **Shift Attention:** Mentally distract yourself from cravings by playing solitaire or a computer game, catching up on social media and news, knitting or other hobby activities, or organizing a messy closet or doing chores.

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