

Behavior module

16-WEEK CURRICULUM

EMOTIONAL EATING

In the *Eating Triggers* lesson, you learned that the sight or smell of food, the time of day, and specific people and activities can trigger a person to eat. Certain feelings or moods can also cause a person to reach for food. For many, feelings are the most compelling reason for overeating. By addressing the underlying emotions that trigger your eating, you'll be more able to manage your weight and eating habits throughout life.

Eating in response to your feelings is called emotional eating. People often use food to shield the pain of negative emotions or enhance positive ones. For example, feeling stressed, angry, lonely, tired or happy can all lead to eating, even when you're not physically hungry.

Emotional hunger (or mind hunger) is different from physical hunger. It is stimulated by thoughts, feelings, and cues in the environment that you've come to associate with food. The problem with emotional hunger is that no matter how much you eat, it will not be satisfying because the hunger is not for food but for other forms of comfort.

Physical hunger occurs when your body needs food for energy. It's recognized by physical signs, like a growling stomach or light-headedness after several hours without food. It's important to know the difference between the two types of hunger so that they can be satisfied appropriately.

The most effective way to identify the feelings and situations that trigger your eating is to keep a food diary. Not only does this allow you to record what you eat but it also makes you aware of the emotions that may cause you to eat. Your diary should be an accurate reflection of everything you eat, when and where you eat, what you're doing and how you feel as you eat, and whether you are truly hungry. (See diary on the reverse side of this page.) If you keep this diary for at least a week, some eating patterns will emerge. You'll be able to see which feelings might trigger you to eat and whether you are eating for physical or emotional reasons.

Once you can identify the feelings that trigger your eating, you can develop strategies for dealing with those feelings. When emotional hunger strikes, you can take action to control it. Confrontation and distraction are two ways to fight back. Choose the strategy that works best for you.

Confrontation is an offensive strategy, in which you meet the urge to eat head on. You view the emotional need to eat as a threat to your control and determine not to be beaten. Not giving in to emotional hunger means winning and that weakens the desire to eat in the future. Distraction is a defensive strategy. When you feel the urge to eat, you do something else to push food out of your mind. For instance, you might call a friend, do relaxation exercises or take a walk instead of eating.

Stress is a Normal Component of Your Life

Using food to cope with stress is not a personality flaw. It is a behavioral problem which needs modification. You simply haven't learned or practiced other skills for coping with stress. Food has been your only tool for managing. If you've become accustomed to using food as the primary coping mechanism in your life, use the following Coping Exercise to explore your habits.

Coping Exercise

	Yes	No
Do you eat to level out emotions?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you eat to "take the edge off?"	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you crave the wonderful "numbness" associated with a full stomach?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does eating make you sleepy, allowing a retreat from the pressures of life?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does eating relieve all kinds of stress, be it personal, social or work related?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Eating compulsively is often a measure of your anxiety. Food relieves the anxiety. It calms you, removes the stress and helps you cope. Learn to recognize the early signs of stress and remove yourself from the vicinity of food.

To break the association of feelings with food, it helps to have alternative activities to take the place of eating. If these activities are going to substitute for food, they need to be enjoyable and easy to do. Here are some ideas:

- Listen to a relaxing CD
- Call or send an email to a friend
- Go for a walk
- Read a book
- Take a bath
- Read a magazine or newspaper
- Do some gardening
- Get involved in a hobby

Activity: Key Into Emotional Eating

Keep a Diary

If you don't already have one, use this daily diary to record what, when, where, and why you eat. Look for patterns that give clues to your eating triggers.

Day of the Week: _____

Time	Place	Food/Amount	Who are you with?	What are you doing?	What are you feeling?	How hungry are you?*

*Rate hunger on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1=not hungry at all and 5=very hungry.

Redirect Your Eating Urges

Look at your diary and identify the feelings that trigger you to eat. Then, in the chart below, list those feelings along with nonfood activities to replace eating (see above for suggestions).

Feelings	Alternative Activities
1.	
2.	
3.	