

When Stress Triggers Overeating

IN ADDITION TO keeping us alive, eating serves countless psychological, social and cultural purposes. We eat to celebrate, punish, comfort, defy and deny. When people eat in response to emotional drives, such as feeling stressed, bored or tired, rather than in response to true physical hunger, it is called emotional eating.

Eating and stress.

Stress often throws a wrench into balanced lifestyles, interfering with plans to exercise, eat well and stay organized. Stress commonly affects appetite and food choices. Under stress, some people lose their appetite and forget to eat, while some people remain unaffected and others find themselves eating more than usual, especially more "comfort foods."

Increase self-awareness.

If you tend to overeat when you are stressed, self-monitoring will help change this behavior. Emotional eaters who monitor their eating behaviors often find that the drive to eat masks unpleasant feelings, such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, fatigue, boredom and anger. They learn to differentiate between "mouth hunger" or emotional eating, and "stomach hunger" or true physical hunger. They uncover situations and feelings that trigger overeating.

Address sources of triggers.

If stress triggers overeating, address the sources of stress. Look for solutions to problems at hand, talk them over with a friend, write in a journal. Acknowledge and address feelings of depression, anger or anxiety. Do whatever you can to reduce feelings of stress.

Most people find that overeating

tends to occur in specific places and specific times. A common time is at home during the evening. Possible solutions include engaging in a hobby that keeps your mind and hands busy, such as going out and exercising. If eating occurs, munch on low-calorie snacks.

Exercise daily.

Exercise reduces stress, helps control appetite, gives you energy and improves sleep quality. All of these factors help reduce emotional eating.

Get more R & R.

Fatigue is one of the most common causes of overeating. Getting plenty of rest and relaxation helps manage stress

eat? It's like the game where you say, "Don't think about pink elephants," and of course, pink elephants spring to mind. Such diets also rarely lead to long-term weight control and good health.

Restrictive diets also create disharmony among body, mind and spirit, as eating behaviors become disconnected from the physiological drives that tell you what, when and how much to eat. Overeaters don't know when they are hungry, what foods they feel like eating, how much to eat or when they are full. People must exercise restraint in this environment of plenty. The mind can be a helpful partner, and nutrition knowledge can be harnessed to work with appetites to create a well-balanced and delicious diet.

Make all food soul food.

A heart-healthy diet should nourish body and soul. Food is supposed to be delicious and eating pleasurable. Include your "comfort foods" as appropriate.

Get help.

Emotional eating is so common that some emotional eating is considered well within the range of normal behavior. Problems arise when emotional eating becomes excessive and interferes with lifestyle and good health, or signals painful emotional needs that require attention. If you feel emotional eating is a problem, it may be wise to work with a counselor trained in eating problems. **FM**

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and reduce overeating. Some emotional eaters find that they overeat because eating is the only time they relax, enjoy life and reward themselves. These folks can learn to enlarge their repertoire of "healthy pleasures" so that they have other ways to nurture themselves besides eating.

Avoid restrictive diets.

Diets that are very low in calories (fewer than 1,400 calories per day) or that restrict certain food groups are psychologically self-defeating, often leading to food cravings and too much focus on food and eating. Have you ever noticed that the more you think about not eating the more you want to

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