

Responding to Emotional Eating

While we eat for physical hunger, we also want to recognize the other reasons we eat. It may be to celebrate achievements or special occasions or to mourn a loss. It could be in response to feeling stressed, bored, anxious, happy, or even excited. Emotional eating is when we eat food in reaction to emotion, not just for physical hunger. Individuals of all ages – from teens to older adults – may experience emotional eating in their lives. While it can be perceived as a shameful habit, emotional eating is a normal response to life's experiences, and we can embrace it as such. We can also consider a few practical ways to protect both our physical and mental health in response to emotional eating.

- **Reassess your environment.** Do you eat emotionally on weekends? After a long day? Only in your house and never out? Considering your environment helps you plan accordingly so you are not eating emotionally in an impulsive or reactive manner, but in an intentional way.
- **Understand what leads you to eat emotionally.** Are there patterns in your eating? It may be helpful to write down what you are eating and what experience led you to emotional eating in the first place. This will allow you to notice and respond in a more healthful way.
- **Account for your feelings.** Feeling sad? Lonely? Bored? Anxious? Consider the best way to acknowledge these feelings and implement self-care measures to ease emotions. Sometimes food can help, but often it's not enough to cope with strong emotions. Taking a walk, calling a friend or family member, or writing in a journal are a few examples that will help address these feelings, redirect your response, and can lead to better physical and mental health.
- **Eat throughout the day.** When we're undernourished or overhungry, we tend to respond by eating more than we normally would. Aim to eat balanced meals and snacks (with protein, carbohydrates, and healthy fats) including foods you enjoy, to stay full and satisfied throughout the day.
- **Don't deprive yourself of your favorite foods.** When we restrict certain foods or food groups because we perceive them as unhealthy, we tend to overindulge when we experience emotional triggers. Deeming food as a "reward" or days as "cheat days" creates the wrong mindset. Instead, eat satisfying amounts of healthier options and enjoy other favorite foods in balance.
- **Extend grace, and learn from experience.** Emotional eating is normal. Have self-compassion, and recognize it is a learning process to re-engage with hunger and fullness cues. Focus on positive changes you can make to your eating habits, and explore other coping mechanisms you can use for handling emotional responses.

We want to transform how we think about emotional eating by considering the positives, rather than only the negatives. We also want to find a way that works best for you because everyone's response to emotional eating will be different. Remember, food is meant to be enjoyed, and not only when we are hungry.

Reference: <https://foodandnutrition.org/blogs/stone-soup/5-tips-curb-embrace-emotional-eating>

Sources: Emily DeWitt, Extension Associate for FCS Extension; Heather Norman-Burgdolf, Extension Specialist for Nutrition and Health