



Feelings on a Plate: Decoding Emotional Eating

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Abstract

Emotional eating, characterized by the consumption of food in response to feelings rather than hunger, has garnered significant attention from researchers and health professionals alike. This phenomenon, often triggered by emotions such as stress, sadness, boredom, or even happiness, can lead to unhealthy eating habits and contribute to various health issues, including diabetes, obesity and eating disorders etc. This article explores the science behind emotional eating, causes of emotional eating, impact of emotional eating on health and its management. By decoding the emotional signals that influence eating behaviors, this article aims to provide a deeper understanding of emotional eating and offer practical approaches for promoting healthier relationships with food.

Key words: Emotional eating, eating behavior, eating habits, health issues

Introduction: Emotional eating is a complex behaviour where individuals use food as a means to cope with emotions rather than to satisfy physical hunger. Emotional eating is using food to make yourself feel better to fill emotional needs, rather than your stomach. Unfortunately, emotional eating doesn't fix emotional problems. In fact, it usually makes you feel worse. Afterward, not only does the original emotional issue remain, but you also feel guilty for overeating. Understanding it in detail involves exploring its causes, identifying the triggers, recognizing its impact, and finding ways to manage it effectively.

The Science Behind Emotional Eating

Several psychological and physiological factors contribute to emotional eating. Stress, for example, triggers the release of cortisol, a hormone that can increase appetite and cravings for

high-fat, high-sugar foods. Additionally, the brain's reward system, involving neurotransmitters like dopamine, reinforces the pleasurable sensations associated with eating comfort foods, creating a cycle that's hard to break.

Emotional hunger vs. Physical hunger

Emotional hunger	Physical hunger
Emotional hunger comes on suddenly	Physical hunger comes on gradually
Emotional hunger feels like it needs to be satisfied instantly	Physical hunger can wait
Emotional hunger craves specific comfort foods	Physical hunger is open to options—lots of things sound good
Emotional hunger isn't satisfied with a full stomach.	Physical hunger stops when you're full
Emotional eating triggers feelings of guilt, powerlessness, and shame	Eating to satisfy physical hunger doesn't make you feel bad about yourself

Causes of Emotional Eating

1. **Stress:** Stress is a pervasive factor in modern life, significantly impacting physical and mental well-being. One of its notable effects is the propensity to trigger emotional eating, where individuals consume food not out of hunger but as a coping mechanism for stress. High levels of stress trigger the release of cortisol, a hormone that can increase appetite and cravings for high-fat, sugary foods.
2. **Emotions:** Feelings of sadness, loneliness, anger, and boredom can prompt people to eat as a way to fill an emotional void or distract from uncomfortable feelings.
 - **Sadness-** Sadness is an emotional pain associated with, or characterized by, feelings of disadvantage, loss, despair, grief, helplessness, disappointment and sorrow.
 - **Loneliness-** Loneliness is the state of distress or discomfort that results when one perceives a gap between one's desires for social connection and actual experiences of it.

- **Shame-** An uncomfortable feeling of guilt or of being ashamed because of your own or someone else's bad behaviour.
- 3. **Anger-** Anger, an intense emotion often accompanied by physiological arousal, can significantly influence eating behaviors, leading to emotional eating. Anger is a powerful emotion that people feel from time to time when someone or something frustrates or annoys them.
- 4. **Childhood Habits:** Childhood is a critical period for the development of lifelong habits, including those related to eating behaviors. Exposure to unhealthy eating patterns and the availability of comfort foods during childhood contribute to emotional eating tendencies. Growing up with food used as a reward or comfort can lead to emotional eating habits in adulthood.
- 5. **Social Influences:** Social influences play a pivotal role in shaping eating behaviors, including the propensity for emotional eating. Various social factors, such as family dynamics, peer relationships, and cultural norms, impact emotional eating patterns. Social gatherings often revolve around food, and peer pressure or the presence of food can lead to eating even when not hungry.

Identification of emotional eating

1. **Emotional Awareness:** Keep a journal to track your mood and eating patterns. Note what you were feeling before you decided to eat.
2. **Situational Cues:** Identify situations or places that prompt emotional eating, such as being at home alone or watching TV.
3. **Behavioral Patterns:** Notice if certain behaviors, like procrastination or stress from work, lead to eating.

Impact of Emotional Eating

1. **Physical Health:** Emotional eating can lead to weight gain, obesity, and related health issues such as diabetes and heart disease. Repetitive emotional eating can result in weight-related health problems.

2. **Mental Health:** This behaviour is often followed by feelings of guilt, shame, and decreased self-esteem, perpetuating a cycle of emotional eating. After the emotional danger has passed, there is usually a sense of guilt and remorse after realising too much food has been eaten. This guilt also has the potential to lead to more emotional eating outbursts or low self-esteem, resulting in a vicious circle.
4. **Nutritional Deficiency:** Frequent consumption of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods can result in poor nutrition. Emotional eating often leads to poor nutritional choices, which can result in nutritional deficiencies. When individuals eat in response to their emotions rather than hunger, they tend to choose comfort foods that are high in sugar, fat, and calories but low in essential nutrients. Here's how emotional eating can contribute to nutritional deficiencies:
 - i) **Vitamins and Minerals:**
 - **Vitamin D:** Often lacking in diets high in processed foods.
 - **Calcium:** Poor dietary choices can lead to inadequate calcium intake, affecting bone health.
 - **Iron:** Insufficient iron can cause anaemia, leading to fatigue and weakness.
 - **Magnesium:** Low levels can result in muscle cramps, mental disorders, and heart disease.
 - **B Vitamins (B6, B12, Folate):** Important for energy production and neurological function, often missing in a diet dominated by unhealthy snacks.
 - ii) **Protein:** Emotional eaters may consume fewer protein-rich foods, which are essential for muscle repair, immune function, and overall health.
 - iii) **Fiber:** A diet high in processed foods and low in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains can lead to insufficient fiber intake, impacting digestive health.
5. **Nausea:** Those who tend to eat when they are feeling stressed or anxious are comforted by the feeling in their stomach that masks their emotions. This often results in overeating and stomach pains as well as nausea later on. The impact of emotional eating is quite

severe, and you may find yourself feeling these symptoms even days after eating a larger quantity of food during one short time period.

Managing Emotional Eating

1. **Mindful Eating:** Pay attention to what you eat and how much you consume. Eat slowly, savor each bite, and stop when you feel full.
2. **Healthy Alternatives:** Find non-food-related ways to cope with emotions, such as exercising, engaging in a hobby, or practicing relaxation techniques.
3. **Structured Eating:** Plan regular meals and snacks to prevent extreme hunger that can lead to emotional eating. Maintaining a regular eating schedule can help regulate your hunger signals and reduce the temptation to eat in response to emotions.
4. **Support System:** Talk to friends, family, or a therapist about your feelings instead of turning to food.
5. **Professional Help**

Therapists and Counsellors: Sometimes, emotional eating can be a sign of deeper psychological issues. Seeking help from a therapist or counsellor can provide strategies and support for managing emotions in a healthier way. Mental health professionals can help you understand the root causes of emotional eating and develop coping strategies.

Dietitians: A registered dietitian can help you create a balanced eating plan and offer advice on healthy eating habits.

Support Groups: Joining a support group can provide a sense of community and shared experiences, making it easier to manage emotional eating.

Tips to Prevent Emotional Eating

1. **Stay Hydrated:** Drink water throughout the day, as thirst can sometimes be mistaken for hunger.
2. **Balanced Diet:** Ensure your diet includes a variety of nutrients to keep you satisfied and reduce cravings.
3. **Get Adequate Sleep:** Poor sleep affects hunger hormones and can lead to increased appetite.



4. **Stress Management:** Practice stress-relief techniques such as yoga, meditation, deep breathing exercises, or journaling.

Conclusion

Emotional eating is a common response to various emotional triggers and can significantly impact one's physical and mental health. Recognizing the signs, understanding the triggers, and implementing healthy coping strategies are essential steps toward managing and overcoming emotional eating. If necessary, seeking professional help can provide additional support and guidance.

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