

Eliminate Emotional Eating

Just about everyone with a weight problem eats for emotional reasons from time to time. One client ate when she was anxious or sad, another ate when she felt overwhelmed, another when he was lonely or bored or angry.

Like these clients, you might soothe yourself with food because you don't like feeling distressed or bored. Food can certainly be an effective distractor – temporarily. But eating doesn't solve the problem that led to your distress in the first place. In fact, eating emotionally creates another problem: You feel bad about straying from your diet.

Case Study

Rita often ate when she was out of sorts. *For example*, one day, Rita's boss asked her to stay late at work for a third night in a row. Rita had many negative thoughts:

He is so inconsiderate! Doesn't he think I have a life? Why should I have to work late? Why doesn't he ask someone else?

These thoughts left her fuming. When she got home late, she was still upset and completely abandoned her food plan. When she'd finished polishing off a tub of ice cream, she got mad at herself.

Had Rita been able to look at the situation more dispassionately, she might have been able to do some problem solving.

She might have realized that she could have nicely, but assertively, turned down her boss's request.

But even if there wasn't a good solution to the problem, she didn't need to eat. She could have responded to her angry thoughts and decreased her distress. Instead, she got riled up, couldn't stand feeling that way, and tried to soothe herself with food.

Contrast Rita's behaviour with that of people without weight problems. It would never occur to most of them to eat when they were upset. They don't rely on food to help them feel better.

People without a weight problem don't think of eating to feel better.

Do you eat emotionally?

Emotional eating involves a desire to distract yourself from an unpleasant feeling. When you find yourself eating for a reason other than true hunger, ask yourself, How was I just feeling emotionally?

- Was I feeling sad, lonely, worried, embarrassed, frustrated, angry, guilty?
- Was I feeling at loose ends, unsettled, bored?
- Was I trying to avoid doing something I didn't want to do?

How to Calm Down

There is nothing wrong with having negative emotions. They're just nature's way of telling us there is a problem. Do you think that you can't tolerate negative emotions? You can! Of course, you don't like feeling upset. But negative emotions aren't dangerous. Nothing bad will happen to you. You won't fall apart. Given enough time, negative emotions – just like cravings – will subside on their own. You don't have to eat.

➤ **A negative emotion is not an emergency.**

Negative emotions are uncomfortable, and the best way to decrease your distress is to respond to your negative thinking and to solve the problem associated with your emotional upset. You will learn how to do this shortly.

But it is sometimes difficult to go right to problem solving (and there might be some problems that are out of your control), especially if you're accustomed to immediately reaching for food when you are upset.

You might need to decrease your distress first, in non-food-related ways. Fortunately, you have already developed many of the skills you will need for dealing with emotional eating. You have learned how to tolerate the unpleasant sensations of hunger and craving and how to decrease your urges to eat.

It's now time to put the techniques you have already learned into practice to help you stop emotional eating. Starting with the mindset techniques and moving onto behavioural techniques if necessary.

Use Mindset Techniques

Apply the same kind of thinking techniques you previously learned to combat emotional eating:

Label how you are feeling. Tell yourself, “I’m just feeling upset.....I’m not hungry”.

Stand Firm. Tell yourself you are absolutely not going to eat just because you are distressed. Remind yourself that you don’t want to strengthen your giving-in muscle and weaken your resistance muscle by straying from your food plan. Think about how eating at this point will undermine your confidence in your ability to stick with your diet.

Don’t give yourself a choice. Once you say to yourself with conviction, NO CHOICE... I’m definitely not going to eat, you will stop struggling. You will struggle though, if you waver and say to yourself, I hate feeling like this.... I don’t know if I can stand not eating.

Imagine the aftermath of giving in. Visualize eating. How long does the pleasure of eating really last? Now, imagine the rest of the picture.

Remind yourself of how many times in your life (dozens? Hundreds? More?) you promised yourself you were not going to stray from a diet. See yourself getting more and more heavy-hearted, discouraged, disappointed in yourself. See how bad you feel that you gave in. Pause for a moment. Now that you have seen the whole picture, which seems better, eating or not eating?

Read your advantages Response Card. Review all the reasons you want to lose weight. Don’t you still want to achieve all those benefits? Aren’t they still important? Is it worth strengthening your giving-in muscle by eating now?

You have to deal with distress in non-food related ways if you want to sustain permanent weight loss.

Most important, remind yourself that you simply will not be able to sustain weight loss if you continue to eat for emotional reasons. You must learn different ways of handling distress so you don’t turn to food for comfort.

Use Behavioural Techniques

Take some action in order to decrease your distress when you are upset.

Distract Yourself

When you are upset, watching TV or reading might not be distracting enough. Look at My Distraction Activities Chart to choose a few activities to try.

Drink a soothing no or low-calorie beverage.

Consider making yourself a cup of tea. Sit down and drink it slowly.

Relax Listen to guided meditation or relaxation techniques. Or do slow, shallow breathing.

The more you practice these mind-set and behavioural techniques, the better you will get at them. Initially, you will find that the techniques are more effective when you are experiencing mild to moderate levels of negative emotions. As you become more proficient, you will also be able to use them when you experience more intense emotions.

Apply several of these techniques as soon as you start to feel upset. Once you calm down, work on solving the problem that led to the negative emotion in the first place. Instead of saying to yourself, “if I’m upset, I will deal with it by eating”, tell yourself, “if I’m upset, I will try to solve the problem ... If I can’t focus on problem solving, I can use my mindset and behavioural tools first”.

These techniques really DO WORK so put the time into practicing them now, it will be worth the effort

Solve Problems

Today you are going to learn how to become a more effective problem solver. Thinking clearly about a problem, even if you haven't figured out a solution, can help you feel more in control, less upset, and therefore, less likely to turn to emotional eating.

Identify the Problem

To solve a problem, you first have to define it. Sometimes, this is easy. Perhaps your boss put a lot of pressure on you, you bounced a cheque, or someone made a negative comment about you. Sometimes, the problem is not so easy to pinpoint. You might notice the emotion but not feel sure about what led to it. Consider asking someone to help you sort things through.

Once you have defined the problem, be sure to identify the negative thoughts running through your mind. Then use the Seven Question Technique to respond to your negative thoughts. Think about the following:-

1. What kind of thinking error could I be making?
2. What evidence is there that this thought might not be true or might not be completely true?
3. Is there an alternative explanation or another way of viewing this?
4. What is the most realistic outcome of this situation?
5. What is the effect of my believing this negative thought and what could be the effect of changing my thinking?
6. What would I tell my friend if he/she were in this situation and had this same kind of thought?
7. What should I do now?

Think of various solutions. Weigh the pros and cons of each. Pick one solution to try and see how it works, just like Tara, a dieter:

Tired from a full day of work and from all of her responsibilities as a mum, Tara would invariably flop on the couch and begin thinking of all of the chores she still had to do. The thought, "I will never get everything done that I need to", led to her feeling anxious. To decrease her anxiety without eating, Tara used the Seven Question Technique, as shown below:-

What kind of thinking error could I be making?

Fortune Telling

1. What evidence is there that this thought might not be true or not completely true?

I have had this thought in the past, and somehow I always get the most important things done.

2. Is there an alternative explanation or another way of viewing this?

Maybe I shouldn't even try to get everything done tonight.

3. What is the most realistic outcome of this situation?

That I will be able to get some things done but not everything, I will have to do the rest another time.

4. What is the effect of me believing this negative thought & what could be the effect of changing my thinking ?

I feel really overwhelmed and paralyzed. If I changed my thinking I would feel less anxious and could get started on doing something sooner.

5. What would I tell my friend if he/she were in this situation and had this thought?

I would tell her to get up right away and do whatever seems easiest, like putting a load of laundry in the washing machine. Then do whatever else seems relatively easy – cleaning the dishes, taking out the rubbish, whatever.

6. What should I do now?

Start right now with a load of laundry and then call a friend for support.

You cannot solve every problem

You also need to be realistic. There are some things that may be beyond your control. Your partner could have an alcohol problem. You could have a serious health condition. You are likely to be very upset. What can you do?

First, you should feel bad about these kinds of things. You would not be human if you were not upset. If you are drawing an unrealistic conclusion about these real-life problems, however, you might be able to respond to your negative thinking. For example, you might have the thought, because of this problem, I am going to have a miserable life. The Seven Question Technique might be useful in this circumstance.

Whether or not you have drawn unrealistic conclusions, make sure to seek support. You need to talk to other people. Ask them to listen. Tell them what they can do to help in practical ways. For example, they might have some ideas of what you can do to make your life better, given these uncontrollable circumstances. If you find that you are still having a hard time dealing with your feelings, consider seeking help from a professional. Reach out.

What are you thinking?

Sabotaging Thought: I can't do this. I can't solve this problem.

Helpful Response: Most problems can be solved – or partially solved – even if I don't see the solution right now.

Sabotaging Thought: This solution is no going to work.

Helpful Response: It might or might not. Maybe I should try it. I can call on a friend to help me figure out what to do.

Sabotaging Thought: I don't even want to think about the problem. I would rather just eat.

Helpful Response: Easing is just a short-term fix that will make me feel even worse in the long run.