

## Tips for dealing with emotional eating

When food is eaten not to satisfy physical hunger but as a coping mechanism for negative emotions, it is called emotional eating. Usually, "unhealthy" foods are consumed. This can lead to a vicious circle: negative emotions such as shame (for the amount of food consumed, for example) and guilt (for breaking a previous resolution to eat less sweets, for example) can develop, leading to more emotional eating.

### Identifying the causes and triggers of emotional eating

- **External factors:** Lack of a daily routine, lack of sleep or relaxing and positive activities, little time to eat and skipping meals can lead to an increased incidence of emotional eating.
- **Forbidden foods and diets:** Excessive restrictions on eating times and amounts, or restrictions on certain foods, can lead to a mental preoccupation with food. Cravings may develop and we may end up impulsively eating "forbidden foods" or binging.
- **Evoke positive emotions:** Food fills the stomach and makes our bodies feel satisfied. Many smells and tastes are also associated with positive childhood memories and can therefore evoke positive emotions (e.g., the smell of fresh bread reminds you of your loving grandmother).
- **Coping with negative emotions:** Eating gives us new energy and can have a positive effect on our mood within a short period of time (see above). Experience tells us that eating can alleviate negative emotions in a short period of time, and we end up eating impulsively when we feel sad or stressed, for example.

### Identify your personal causes and triggers

- **Eating diary:** Over a specified period of time (for example, a week), write down the type and amount of food you ate, the situations you were in at the time, and your thoughts and feelings before and after eating. This can help you become familiar with your eating behavior and identify your triggers for emotional eating.

Time (from... to...) and situation (alone, TV...)	Thoughts (before eating)	Emotions (before eating)	Level of hunger before (1-10)	Type and amount of food and drink	Thoughts (after eating)	Emotions (after eating)	Level of hunger after (1-10)

- **Mindfulness:** Ask yourself: "What am I trying to achieve by eating? What signals is my body sending me? What do I really need right now?" in relevant situations.

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- **Eat regular meals:** Plan regular and balanced meals as part of your day (such as: breakfast, snack, lunch, snack, dinner).
- **Make impulsive eating more difficult:** When you go shopping, don't buy the foods you typically indulge in when you eat emotionally (such as sweets). If you don't want to abstain completely, put these foods in a place where you have to make a conscious decision to eat them, such as in a locked cupboard.
- **Take a minute:** Don't give in to the impulse to eat immediately, but take three breaths before making a conscious decision.
- **Limit your food:** When you decide to eat, think about how much you want to eat (5 pieces of chocolate, a small bowl of crisps) and put the rest away before you start eating.

- **Mindful eating:** When you eat, take your time and actively focus on each bite with all your senses. If you eat while watching TV or using your smartphone or tablet, it is harder to assess how full you are and how much you have eaten. We often only stop when the plate - or bag or container - is empty and end up not enjoying what we have eaten.
- **List the pros and cons:** Write down the short- and long-term consequences of emotional eating. You can carry this list with you (for example, in your wallet) to be prepared for future episodes and add to it.
- **Look for alternatives:** Make a list of activities you can do instead of giving in to the urge to eat, such as going for a walk or lighting incense.
- **Observer's perspective:** Take a mental step back and look at your thoughts, feelings and physical sensations with curiosity and without judgement: "I'm thinking about chocolate", "My mouth is watering"... Remember that you do not have to act on every thought or emotion, but are free to choose what to do with the information you are gathering. Experiment with them, perhaps by placing thoughts and feelings on clouds passing by or in cars driving away.
- **Internal counter-image:** If the urge to eat is very strong, imagine a different situation with as many details as possible and involving as many different senses as possible (smell, taste, ...). This could be a walk through freshly cut grass or on a beach that smells of the salty sea.
- **Opposite posture:** If the urge is very strong, it may help to put your body in a position that makes eating difficult, unusual or uncomfortable (e.g., clenching your fists, standing up).
- **Take responsibility:** If you have already started eating, be aware that what happens next is still up to you. You can still decide not to continue eating, it's not too late.

### Practice makes perfect

It is not easy to break patterns of behavior that may have existed for years. You may need to try out some of the ideas above to see which ones work best for you. Set small, achievable goals and give yourself a fair chance. Reward yourself when you achieve your goals.

### Composed with the help of:

Preuss, H., Legenbauer, T., & Schnicker, K. (2018). *Impulse zur Verbesserung der Impuls- und Emotionsregulation. Ein kognitiv-behavioraler Therapieansatz für Patienten mit Adipositas und pathologischem Essverhalten*. Hogrefe.