



Emotional eater's guide to

COME OUT ON TOP



Emotional eaters are almost always blamed on being overweight as well as on their eating habits and unhealthy lifestyle. It causes shame, cynicism and often worsening of the situation. The particular problem is something that most can't help the person in. I wrote this guide to all emotional eaters. As an emotional eater I know all the exact problems, symptoms, and the most important - the ways to control emotional eating.

The common phrase "*eat often, healthy, exercise a lot*" is a good advice, but useless in emotional eating. It is more of a psychological problem than physiological. I want to share efficient ways to cope with emotional healthing to you.

Test: Which signs point to you being an emotional eater?

(more than 3 signs indicate a substantial problem)

- eating and food causes feelings that are stronger than normal, either positive or negative, often both and even simultaneously
- food is considered as a reward
- food is used to help relax
- eating is way to spend time
- food is always on your mind, even if you're not hungry
- eating is hard to control and can even be an obsession
- changes in mood are followed by eating
- eating causes physical disturbance - being too full, reflux, bowel problems, overweight, but still you can't stop
- certain foods cause certain moods
- rituals associated to eating
- you'll search for excuses to eat even if you're not hungry
- elf-blaming
- lying to yourself (avoiding or whitewashing things)
- the personality of a perfectionist
- all-or-nothing mentality
- impulsive personality
- diets don't work (or at least in the long run)

Reasons for emotional eating

Emotional eating is a very complicated problem with both psychological and physiological components. We don't understand the problem fully yet. This is a concise summary of the most common reasons for emotional eating. Do you recognize yourself from these?

Limiting. Limiting calories, certain foods and meals causes a strong automatic psychological and physiological feeling to "load calories". Willpower is a limited resource and when it fails (which happens eventually) there is a significantly bigger risk to overeat.

Disorder in recognizing the signals of the body. Emotional eaters can't recognize their body's physiological and psychical signals correctly. For example thirst and loneliness are felt as hunger.

A shift in **HPA** (hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal) hormonal system. This is typical with people who have had trauma and stress during childhood. Instead of stress decreasing appetite, it paradoxically increases it and turns into emotional eating in stressful situations.

Disorder in oversensitivity and recognizing external signals.

Emotional eaters are more sensitive to food-related external signals - smell of food, seeing food, talking about food, etc. They use food subconsciously to shift their focus away from negative feelings.

Genetic predisposition. During evolution, people have never had so much food available as today. During evolution, beings have always eaten as much as possible when food was available (since no one can predict when the next proper meal is coming). This genetic instinct has not vanished anywhere and some people have it stronger than others (like any other genetic traits). When food is available in bigger amounts, people eat more, instinctively

It's not your fault!

First and a very important thing to understand. The mechanisms of emotional eating come deep from ourselves, from our history and our genes. It is partly a totally normal phenomenon. You haven't done anything wrong to deserve an eating disorder and all its problems that come with it.

Most likely you have experienced some kind of childhood abuse, stress or insecurity. It is possible that you have experienced social criticism and shame about overeating or being overweight, which have only made the situation worse. Free yourself from the guilt.

You haven't caused these problems to yourself in any way. Let yourself feel guilt-free. Do not follow the guilt by media, society and healthcare, who blame you for not controlling your eating. Always remember that it's not your fault. While it is important to understand cause-and-effect relationships, it is much more important to focus on things that you can make a difference in.

You are in control!

Most of us emotional eaters feel out of control of their life and eating too often or constantly. It is a natural feeling and partly protects us from unpleasant consequences. But that doesn't help us to progress at all.



You are in control of your eating!
Maybe it's only 0,1%, but even that's a start.
Think carefully - beside all problems you have no control of - what are the things you are in control of? Maybe you are not in control of your mood - it might shift quickly. You might not be in control of being annoyed or anxious, and start overeating. But are you in control of what food you have at home? In control of how much you exercise or sleep? Of how much water you drink? Maybe even these are too much at the moment. Maybe you are in control of something smaller - how fast you eat? How much salt you put in the food? Do you tinker with your phone or watch TV while eating? You are never without some control. Start from very small things and take control back 1 small thing at a time. You are not the slave of your environment and "fate". It requires work and patience, but I promise that it will be worth it. You are in control of your life and eating, don't ever forget that!



Recognize the triggering factors!

As we mentioned earlier, emotional eaters sometimes have difficulties in recognizing external and internal messages. Recognizing physiological and psychological signals is a skill. It can be learned and trained just like all skills. It is very important for emotional eaters to learn how to listen and interpret these messages.

Start by becoming conscious about this fact. Start thinking why you are eating right now. Try to think if you are eating for hunger or any other reason. Figure out the triggers in the environment that make you think about food.



An excellent method of learning to recognize messages is a food diary. The purpose of a food diary is not to measure the amount and contains of food, but what kind of factors effect your eating habits. Write constantly when and what you ate, In addition write down how you are feeling before and after food, your physical and mental mood. How do you feel after eating. Where did you eat. Try to be thorough and find repeating patterns. For example (a simplification):

- Time and place?
- The food you ate?
- Mood on a scale of 1-10
- Physical and mental mood
- How you feel after eating

Stop dieting!

One of the biggest triggers of stress eating is dieting. With dieting I'm talking about significant limiting of calories, meals or foods. It is a totally normal physiological phenomenon that the body starts hormonal changes in the state of energy deficiency, where the body's mission is to stop starvation. At the point when the "regimen" ends the reloading of energy starts and most dieters gain weight. Other people are more prone to this. The smartest method is to relearn eating in a regular and even way than the changing rollercoaster of over- and undereating. If you are overweight and want to lose weight, limiting only the calories is not the answer. Probably you will gain all the weight back. Before everything you will have to eliminate the processes that maintain emotional eating. Stopping diets is one of the biggest of them.

Learn to get along with your feelings and control stress

"There's never too much stress - only too little recovery"

Nick Hall.

Emotional eaters have the habit of "avoiding" and "dismissing" certain feelings. It's either a learned habit or it helps in surviving. With emotional eaters the problem is that it leads to eating instead of feeling emotions. How to improve this habit? There's no simple or one single answer.

It is important to become aware of your feelings, what we feel and why. A (food) diary is one way to do that. Meditation, mindfulness, conversational help, psychotherapy are examples of other options that contribute to understanding and experiencing your feelings.

Uncontrolled stress transforms to distress. Distress eats willpower and turns the person impulsive. The risk to lose control and replacing negative feelings with food multiplies during stress. However, stress is a fully controllable and normal phenomenon. As a counterbalance, stress requires recovery and the best situation would be that the division of these would be 50-50.



Avoid or decrease exposure to high risk situations, plan

All emotional eaters have situations where their risk to overeat is a lot bigger than other situations. It can be the evening after a hard day at work, holiday/vacation, coffee breaks at work, etc. When you know and recognize these situations well, you can plan a lot better how to act in these situations and even how to reduce their exposure. For example, if you know that when you go to the shops after work you often buy an ice cream to reward yourself for doing a good job, it is smarter to go shopping at other times and with a shopping list.

I, for example, buy most of the week's foods already on Sunday and go to the shops very rarely during the week.

Do this: List 3-5 most common situations where you overeat. After each one write as many ways to control these beforehand as you can. This mental exercise only helps you to understand risky situations and eating behavior a lot better.



Fall in a controlled manner

As mentioned earlier, limiting yourself is one of the biggest triggers of emotional eating. Emotional eaters use a lot of willpower, concentration and energy. People, who don't have a problem with emotional eating, do not understand the amount of work that is constantly needed to stay on track.

100% of people some time find themselves in a situation where there's no more willpower left and overeating comes as an automatic cause of that. One important to cope with this is to plan the situations of overeating and falling over in advance. It takes the constant limiting and impulsive reacting away from the whole picture.

For example, if you know that you have 1 meal a week where you can eat treats freely, it is a lot easier to control eating for the rest of the week. In addition to this you are more able to control how and what you eat. Instead of finding yourself eating thousands of calories of pizza, ice cream, beer or chocolate after losing all willpower, you can plan a proper but delicious meal that fills all the requirements you have for treats.

Use social support

We are social creatures and we can't get over that. Social environments affect our eating habits immensely. Use your instinctive strength for your own benefit. Agree with someone close, a coach or even a work buddy to follow you and support you next to you. My personal support is my partner Ida. She reminds me of problematic situations, paradigms and behavior that I myself don't notice, without criticizing. In addition to that we have a subconscious need to fit into social contexts which means that we don't want to disappoint anyone. It makes us think about eating more consciously instead of eating through our lizard brains. Talk to people who are important to you and ask support from them. Explain clearly what you expect from them. Say that you need support and external perspective instead of criticism and nagging.

Control your environment

This is related to the high-risk situations mentioned earlier. I wanted to talk about this separately because with the environment I'm talking about the circumstances where we spend most of our time. They mainly include work and home. How to control your own environment at home, for example?

- don't buy foods at home that trigger overeating. Rather buy them immediately before you "fall in a controlled manner".
- have enough healthy food at home so that no situations arise where you have to go to the shops, fast-food restaurant or order a pizza to home when hungry
- prepare food for work in advance to avoid situations of losing control in a cafe, cafeteria or with snacks in the breakroom
- plan meals in advance. One of the reasons why the mantra of regular eating is repeated everywhere is that meal planning prevents reactive (as a reaction to something) eating.

Understand and learn from mistakes

Emotional eating is normal. It's not prohibited or punishable in any way. Often emotional eaters themselves and their social environment cause the feel of guilt from overeating. Instead of preventing this from the future it does the opposite and increases its probability. How to prevent this? First of all you need to understand that it's not that serious. And you haven't done anything wrong. Feeling merciful to yourself decreases the possibility of emotional eating and paradoxically - increases willpower. Turn your guilt to a process of learning. Think objectively - what lead you to this situation.

Understand that these situations will probably occur in the future. Give yourself a permission to do so. But at the same time try to think of ways to affect them.

Being bored and hungry are normal feelings

Being bored is the biggest trigger of emotional eating for some people. We have somehow in this digital society learned that our brains need to be stimulated all the time. It can be social media, email, netflix, TV or one of hundreds of other digital or non-digital channels. When stimulation ends for a while, it can easily trigger an empty and bored feeling. For me it is probably the biggest problem. As mentioned earlier, for emotional eaters it leads to replacing the empty feeling with eating. At that moment eating deceives our brains to think that we are doing something proper and important for a few minutes.

First of all - our brains do not require stimulation for 100% of the time we are awake. To the contrary, we should learn to get away from the Matrix and be alone with our thoughts. Without them making us anxious. Replacing doing nothing and being bored with eating is not a solution. Learning to get rid of that is a long process, but it starts from understanding the above. Another feeling - physiological at this time - that we have started to consider unnatural, is hunger. Mostly "hunger" is not even the feeling of that, but that the stomach isn't full.

In a high-energy environment, it is common for food to be available at all times and the stomach to be constantly full. If the feeling of a full stomach ends, it might even feel a bit alarming. This is also accompanied by the learned knowledge that "A healthy person eats after every x or y hours". I challenge you to change this dangerous interpretation of your body's signals. If something, then a full stomach is dangerous. A half-full or an empty stomach are completely normal feelings! You shouldn't be scared of them or try to prevent them or overcompensate them. On the contrary - try fasting for a half day - and you'll notice that nothing happens. Instead you might feel surprisingly good!

When we get used to that the feeling of a not completely full stomach is totally normal, the risk to compensate the feeling by overeating decreases significantly.

Stop the cycle

Have you ever find yourself in the situation where after a long period of staying on track you "fall down" and overeat constantly? If you are an emotional eater, there is a big probability that it's easy to say that "Well, I lost control now. There's nothing to be done anymore. I can just give up now". But naturally, it is a wrong statement and you are just lying to yourself. Falling down and emotional eating are normal, and you shouldn't feel guilty for that. But - you should make it an excuse and give up completely. Learn to stop the cycle quickly and efficiently. Don't ever use one mistake as an excuse to do 5 more. That cycle is harder to get rid of. Every time we give up we tell our brains that this is a normal way to act and every time in the future runs through our hands easier than the last. Learn to get your self back on track as soon as possible, this increases your willpower, confidence and decreases the possibility of emotional eating.

Food can be a significant source of pleasure, even without too much of it, being anything exotic or offering special feelings. Learn to appreciate food as it is.

