



Habits for life: Emotional Eating

All kinds of emotions can compel us to eat. Boredom, stress, and depression are all common triggers for children and adults as well as positive emotions like excitement and anticipation.

In a world where we are often surrounded by food, eating can be a common response to regulate our emotional state and can often make us feel better. While there is nothing wrong with using food to cope with feelings some of the time it becomes a problem when we dull our emotions with food rather than identifying, expressing or managing them.



When children eat to soothe their negative feelings, their food tends to be high in calories (e.g., sweets) therefore they consume more calories. If children emotionally overeat often, they are also more likely to be overweight.

Emotional eating can also often become a habit, and like any habit can be broken. It maybe hard, but once aware of emotional eating patterns, families can work together to curtail it.

Here are some top tips to help with emotional eating:



Tip1: Limit Screen time

- There's no question about the direct relationship between watching TV and overeating. Snacking while watching TV, regardless of hunger is a habit young people develop that's often reinforced by advertisements aimed at kids promoting sugary treats and drinks. Idle time in front of a screen increases the likelihood of idle eating to go along with it.

Tip 2: Make your house healthy, have a designated area for food

- Take a look at your refrigerator and cupboards and cut down on temptations.
- Try to stock up on healthy snacks like fresh fruits and vegetables instead of junk food. Expect some resistance at first, but don't make it a battle of the wills just keep trying.
- Rather than leaving snacks in different places keep everything in the kitchen and dining room so that there are clearly defined eating areas and less visual stimulation.

Tip 3: Be careful as to how you use food

- Don't use food as a reward. Rewards that don't involve food are more appropriate. Have a fun family day out, go for a bike ride or plan an activity together. This will help diminish the pairing of eating and self-nurturing.
- Research has found that school-age children whose parents fed them more to soothe their negative feelings were more likely to eat emotionally later on. Reversely with children who were more easily soothed by food, parents were more likely to feed them for emotional reasons.



Tip 4: Try to Figure out what's triggering emotional eating

- Check in with how your child is feeling. If you're aware of the social and emotional issues they are experiencing, guide them to make better choices when dealing with their emotions without eating. Ask about school, friends, and how they are feeling.
- Help them to find healthy ways to handle stress; mindfulness, deep breathing, going for a walk, or listening to music.

Tip 5: Model healthy behaviours

- Rather than dieting, the key is for parents to model good behaviours and provide children with the right kinds of foods. In older children encourage discussions around how they are feeling when they are suspected of emotional eating, you might ask your child, "Are you bored?" or "Are you really hungry, is your stomach growling?"

Tip 6: Be mindful of environmental challenges

- Sometimes, it is not entirely an individual choice that contributes to emotional eating. School lunches, for instance, may not supply any ideal choices. So, the better alternative may be a healthy lunch from home.

Tip 6: Have your child keep a food diary

- If your child is older, keeping a written record of what, how much and when they eat may help to see patterns in how mood affects what and why they choose to eat.
- Encourage your child to ask themselves questions such as 'Why do I want this chocolate bar? Am I really hungry?' If not, get them to try to figure out what emotions they are feeling, stressed, angry, bored, scared, sad, and lonely.

Tip 7: Get out of the house

- It may seem obvious, but not everybody does it. Try something you and your child can do together, whether it's a hike at a local park, a casual soccer game, or walking the dog. Not only will you be keeping your kids active you will be instilling healthy habits.



References:

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Derbyshire Healthy Futures Services-Derbyshire Community Health Service NHS Trust Emotional Eating
http://www.dchs.nhs.uk/assets/public/dchs/llb/tools/tools_111/9_DCHS_A5_8pp_Emotional_Eating.pdf

How to Change Emotional Eating and Binge Eating Habits <https://www.webmd.com/parenting/raising-fit-kids/mood/change-emotional-eating>

Parents' use of emotional feeding increases emotional eating in school-age children: April 25, 2017
www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/04/170425092339.htm

Emotional eating and feasting | Diabetes UK

<https://www.diabetes.org.uk/guide-to-diabetes/enjoy-food/eating-with-diabetes/food-psychology/emotional-eating-and-feasting>

VISIT THESE USEFUL WEBSITES

www.nhs.uk/Change4Life/Pages/healthy-eating.aspx

Change4Life campaign to help families eat well, free resources for all who join.

<https://www.nhs.uk/change4life/food-facts/healthier-snacks-for-kids> Change4Life information on healthier snacks for kids.

www.henry.org.uk

Information to support families to be healthier and prevent child obesity.

<https://www.bhf.org.uk/heart-health/children-and-young-people>

Top tips on keeping your child healthy, from the British Heart Foundation.