Eating Comfort Foods Overshadows Response to True Emotions

Do you eat when you are feeling sad, lonely or bored? Do you celebrate or reward yourself with food? When you are stressed or worried, do you crave a certain food?

Sometimes the strongest longings for food happen when you're at your weakest point emotionally. People turn to food for comfort when they face difficult problems or when they need to keep themselves occupied. This practice, known as emotional eating, occurs when people consume large quantities of food (often junk food) in response to feelings instead of hunger.

People eat as a way to suppress or soothe negative emotions, such as stress, anger, anxiety, boredom, sadness and loneliness. This often leads to eating too much food, especially high-calorie, sweet, salty and fatty foods. Eating then becomes a habit, preventing one from learning skills that can effectively resolve emotional distress.

Why do negative emotions lead to overeating? Some foods may seem to be addictive. For example, when you eat palatable foods, such as chocolate, your body releases trace amounts of mood- and satisfaction-elevating opiates. This internal reward may cause you to develop a preference for foods that are most closely associated with specific feelings.

Additionally, foods also serve as a distraction. Although temporary, when you’re eating, your thoughts focus on the pleasant taste of comfort food. However, your attention soon returns to your worries when the eating ends (now bringing the guilt of overeating.)

Situations and emotions that trigger eating can be divided into five main categories:

- **Social** – eating around other people
- **Emotional** – eating in response to negative feelings
- **Situational** – eating because the opportunity is there (passing a bakery, watching TV)
- **Thoughts** – making excuses for eating (scolding oneself for something)
- **Physiological** – eating in response to physical cues (hunger, headache)

Become aware of what triggers cause you to eat. Keep a food diary that records what and when you eat as well as what stressors, thoughts or emotions you are experiencing each time you eat. Rate your hunger on a scale of 1 (Starving) to 10 (Overstuffed). This will help you to identify eating patterns and triggers to avoid.

Recognizing true physical hunger will help to control emotional eating. If you ate just a few hours ago and don’t have a rumbling stomach, you’re probably not really hungry.

Find other ways to comfort yourself instead of food. Rather than eating more cookies, take a walk, go to a movie, listen to music or call a friend. Spend time enjoying yourself.

Avoid having an abundance of high-calorie comfort foods in the house or desk drawer. Feeling down and craving comfort foods? Avoid shopping until these feelings have subsided and won’t influence your decisions at the store.

Make a point to get adequate rest and exercise regularly. You can manage your mood much more effectively when your body is fit and well rested. You will be better able to fight off stress when you take good care of yourself.

When you find yourself giving in to emotional eating, it is important to forgive yourself and start fresh the next day. Try to learn from your experience and determine how you can prevent it in the future. Always focus on the positive changes you are making to ensure better health.