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Eating Your Heart Out

Emotional Eating—A Learned Behavior

Some people wouldn't be able to think about food, let alone eat it, if they were emotionally upset or experiencing intense feelings of any kind, including being physically tired. Others, in the same situation would be able to think of nothing else. I am referring to the "I eat when I'm happy; I eat when I'm sad; I eat when I'm hurt; I eat when I'm stressed; I eat when I'm tired; I eat when I'm anxious or I eat when I'm afraid—people. The connection between emotions and eating is a learned behavior and it can be unlearned. Emotional Eating is not directly tied to your biochemistry. Anxiety or low mood feelings that triggering this behavior may be due to biochemical imbalance, but the habit of connecting the emotion to food and eating through those emotions is not. It is a habit, usually adopted early on in life.

People either learn to acknowledge their feelings or to deny their feelings, but either way, they may or may not have learned to connect these feelings to eating.

Normal eaters do not use food to balance emotions. They just eat when they are hungry and don't use food to soothe emotions. They are ones who can leave the last few pieces of food on their plate because they just "couldn't eat another bite", and they are the ones who can be satisfied with just one cookie or a few crackers to tide them over 'til dinner. They may experience the very same feelings as the emotional eater but do not connect food with these feelings.

Learning to Experience Feelings And Expressing Them Appropriately

As children, either we are allowed to express our feelings or we are taught to repress them. Parents may or may not teach their children acceptable ways of dealing with anger and other emotions. When it comes to anger, many parents themselves were only taught one way to deal with it, and that was to *stuff it*. Children learn lifelong dysfunctional patterns, whether connected to eating or not, if they are taught to repress their feelings instead of how to express them in healthy ways. Learning to express any emotion in a healthy way is the crux of the *Eating Your Heart Out* Workshops (www.lifestylecare

coach.com). Understanding the psychological and physical benefits of positively expressing emotions is critical. Whether the emotion is positive or negative, striking a balance and honoring the emotion is necessary if Emotional Eating is to be eliminated.

Observation Without Judgment—Assertive Actions

Having emotions or feelings is a normal and vital part of our human experience. The optimal way to deal with feelings includes 3 stages: acknowledging them, acknowledging and experiencing them, or acknowledging, experiencing and expressing them. Ideally we are looking for assertive-expression as the endpoint. The most effective way to handle emotions is by being clear and non-judgmental about them and by taking care of yourself with assertive behaviors when necessary (as opposed to being aggressive or passive). Observation without judgment, is critical to success. Learning to express assertively is a critical skill.

Aggressive actions only highlight *feelings of being out-of-control, producing a loss of self-respect, bad feelings, tension or anxiety—major triggers for food cravings*. A passive person who does not honor their emotions takes them in silently, and later, gets even is considered passive-aggressive. Just as with an aggressive response to emotions, *passive responses result in a loss of self-control, self-respect, bad feelings, tension or anxiety—major triggers for food cravings*. Non-Emotional (normal) eaters, who practice aggressive or passive behaviors, may experience the same bad feelings as the emotional eater but they use non-food behaviors to feel better. (often negative, abusive or addictive ones)

Every emotional situation has the potential to bring about an eating reaction. For the emotional eater it necessary to feel and/or express feelings, assertively and in control, in order for emotional encounters not to become a food-trigger. Diligent practice may be required until expressing emotions assertively and calmly is natural.

At the Top of the Emotions List—Anger –Fear-Sadness-Joy

While there are many emotions, four basic ones direct our feeling state. They can be categorized as anger, sadness, fear and joy. During any given day you are likely to be *mad, sad, glad* or *scared*. Living with joy is of course the ideal, but day-to-day challenges usually offer other emotions. *The more one practices disconnecting emotions from eating, the easier it becomes. There will come a day when only one emotion is still connects to eating and then—there will come the day when even that emotion disconnected..*

Anger is usually the most powerful food-connector. Physical exercise is one positive way to relieve feelings of anger. Physical abuse is its negative counterpart. Assertive verbal expression will work, too. When anger is not dissipated, it can become connected with food as a way to “stuff-it-down” and to avoid becoming explosive and out-of-control.

When some people are either anxious or fearful they may become physically uncomfortable. Their gut-physiology can be soothed with food during stressful times since certain foods help release serotonin, our natural relaxing neurotransmitter. For these people, anxiety or fear becomes connected with eating for relief.

Sadness and the accompanying feelings of loss may best be released by sharing it with someone. If support is lacking, or if someone is unable to reach out and ask for support, often comfort through food is sought. Knowing that you are not alone and your feelings are valid can help disconnect them from eating. Family, friends, or healthcare professionals may be the best food replacement options for deep feelings of sadness or loss.

Rarely will you find only a joy/happiness connection to food. It is true that happy occasions offer the opportunity to overeat or binge because food is usually offered in excess. Often, even at these occasions, *mad*, *sad* or *scared* also lurk beneath the surface waiting to be felt and expressed. If it is only fun/happy events that seem to connect you to overeating, take a look beneath the surface to see if there are hidden emotions or if you suffer from feelings of deprivation.

Deprivation—More Than Just a Feeling

Deprivation is more than just a surface emotion often caused by societal pressures on body image/thinness and its related activity—dieting. Physical, emotional and environmental deprivation plays a significant role in creating Emotional Eating. For most people struggling with chronic symptoms related to these patterns, they're likely was some physical deprivation, at some time in their lives, though not necessarily at a survival level. Even if the body received proper food nutrients, perhaps they were not absorbed or assimilated properly. This deprivation, at a cellular level, may be indicative of metabolic issues needing to be rectified. Most of us may have experienced some type of deprivation at some point in their lives; however, each of us reacts differently.

Resolving Underlying Psychological Issues and Resistances to Change

Many times there are unconscious patterns along with emotions that keep us stuck and seemingly render us incapable of change, in spite of the psychological issues we may be

working to resolve. These behavior patterns may or may not be food related; however they can dovetail with the patterns that are directly related to food. And they will require your attention.

Those with the Emotional Eating issue maintain, at least intellectually, that they want to disconnect their emotions from eating. However, one part of a person may be saying *yes*, while another part is saying, *no*. While one part of us looks forward to the relief that change will bring, another part wants to remain just as we are in order to survive and cope. We have developed behavior patterns that, correctly or incorrectly, constructively or destructively, help us get what we need. Most often, until we shine the spotlight on them, these patterns go unnoticed. Among others, these may include patterns of reward, self-punishment, physical pain, helplessness and/or role modeling. Realizing and changing these patterns also plays an important part in eliminating Emotional Eating.

Successfully disconnecting your emotions from eating does not necessarily mean that you will have resolved a related underlying psychological issues. The underlying issues may or may not remain depending upon the progress you have made in that area. However, breaking the bond between those issues and eating is the expected outcome for you. It is possible to be rid of Emotional Eating behaviors and still have lingering psychological dysfunctional patterns to deal with. Some people spend a lifetime healing their emotional wounds without experiencing Emotional Eating, while others may spend a few to several months and eliminate their Emotional Eating pattern and not have deep psychological issues to deal with. Everyone is not only biochemically unique, but also emotionally unique.

On a final note: in addition to understanding this information, successful strategies introduced and practiced in the Eating Your Heart Out workshops may be helpful to successfully eliminate emotional eating. (See www.lifestylecarecoach.com/resources)