

EMOTIONAL EATING

it's ok to eat emotionally from time to time

Food is used to celebrate, comfort and nurture. Just think of the newborn who is offered the breast or bottle in response to his crying.

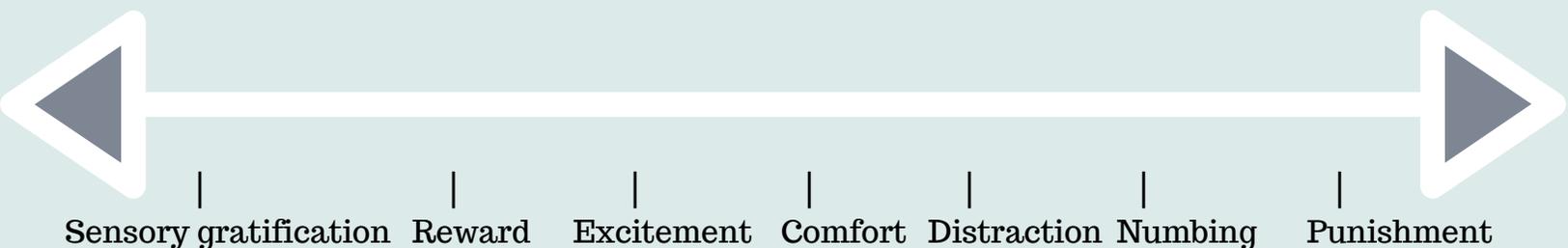
It's actually ok to eat for pleasure and even sometimes for comfort. It's ok to enjoy your eating. It's all about balance.

Continuum of emotional eating

What is important to understand is that emotional eating exists on a continuum from mild to problematic.

*Next month's
newsletter on:*

Self-nurturance



Sensory Gratification

An emotional feeling you might experience while eating is sensory gratification. This is the mildest form of emotional eating. It's simply eating for pleasure. This is a normal and positive feeling. So just because sometimes you eat "emotionally" does not mean there is anything wrong with you. In fact, you will find it will take less food to feel satisfied when you eat for pleasure.

Food as a reward

Sometimes we use food as a reward. "When I finish this project, I'm going to give myself a treat". This is also ok, but it depends on how often you're doing this and if you're connecting this to your hunger and fullness.

Food can be exciting

Food can also be a form of excitement. Looking forward to your next meal can trigger feelings of excitement. But if you overeat, you can go quickly to excitement to despair. It's important that the foundation of connecting to your hunger and fullness (eating mindfully) is in place. Also, if your main excitement in life is centered around food, you are not living a very balanced life.

Food as comfort

Another emotional feeling connected with eating is comfort. This is also ok depending on how often this happens. Maybe you're feeling down and you think how comforting it would be to have some homemade macaroni and cheese. You're eating when you're hungry and you're stopping when you're full. And you feel comforted.

But if you find yourself going to food every time you're feeling uncomfortable and you find yourself eating beyond your fullness this becomes a problem.

Distraction

Emotional eating also can be used as means for distraction. You feel bored or anxious and you decide to go to food.

When you're distracting yourself with food, you're not able to tune into your intuitive signals. It's hard to know if you're hungry or full and when you feel satisfied.

Numbing

Another emotional trigger is using food for sedation or numbing if you're feeling lonely or unloved or frustrated or angry.

You may be turning to food to push down all of these feelings.

Unfortunately when you do this, you're depriving yourself of all of the satisfaction that eating has to offer for you and it can lead you to feeling completely out of control. Some people have no outlet for their own self-imposed perfectionistic and rigid lives and the only way they can loosen the reins on their lives is to be very messy and chaotic with their eating.

Punishment

The last place on the continuum is the most severe and destructive form of emotional eating. This is using food for punishment.

Sometimes, when people use food for sedation or numbing frequently enough, they start to feel bad about themselves. So they keep overeating and overeating as a way to punish themselves. They don't taste the food, feel no pleasure in it and sometimes actually begin to hate food.

The good news is that this behavior starts to disappear when they learn to give themselves self-compassion and self-nurturance.

Emotional eating or "diet backlash"?

It's important to make a distinction between overeating for emotional reasons and overeating as a result of "diet backlash".

Some people feel like they are emotional overeaters or compulsive overeaters. They feel like their eating is out of control. But is the overeating a result of using food as a coping mechanism or is this just a rebound effect from the deprivation experienced with dieting and food restriction?

In other words, are you overeating because you're starved and deprived? And if you stop the deprivation and start making peace with food, will the "emotional eating" go away?

So, first you need to determine whether the overeating you are experiencing is true emotional eating or overeating due to the backlash effect from dieting.

And if you're having dieting backlash, you need to go back to Principle 1 - Reject the Diet Mentality (see February Newsletter).

Remember, it's ok to eat emotionally from time to time. It's not ok to eat emotionally as a regular part of your life. Before learning how to cope with emotional eating, there needs to be a foundation of self-nurturance. If your basic needs are not being met, you leave yourself vulnerable to eating problems. See July Newsletter on Self-nurturance.

References

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