

Emotional Eating—Discover the Role of Food in Your Life

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Our emotions play a significant role in our food choices. Think about how often you would go to grandma and grandpa’s house, and your favorite snack would be waiting for you. Food was associated with love! I can recall visiting my grandparents and always making a cake. Every dinner was followed with a huge slice. Grandma would always have Ritz crackers with salmon flavored cream cheese waiting for me, and open faced avocado sandwiches with the toast dripping with butter. These are wonderful memories, and it’s not difficult to drift back to those moments... associating those foods with comfort. And I may eat just to soothe myself and avoid an uncomfortable feeling. Have you been there?

Emotional eating is common. Let’s start there. I have plenty of clients who engage in mindless noshing during anxiety ridden situations, when they are feeling angry, sad, bored, or even scared. The biggest problem—they are physically and psychologically unhealthy because of these habits. Understand that it’s natural to engage in eating in certain situations not because you are hungry but because it’s circumstantial, let’s call it. For example, you attend a wedding and have a piece of cake, or you are out with friends and you have a few bites of the appetizer while you’re socializing. When you begin to feel at the mercy of food; however, and eating becomes automatic when difficult emotions arise, then it has become problematic. In other words, emotional eating can be viewed on a continuum. Most often my clients do not realize what they are doing until we start to break down the process of their eating and identify when their eating occurs and under what circumstances. We work to increase their awareness of when they are putting food into their mouths, and more importantly, practice understanding themselves and their emotions in order to develop more productive coping skills!

The body goes through many hormonal changes on a daily basis. The food we eat helps to regulate many of these hormonal fluctuations. So not only can eating be psychologically driven, but it most certainly is physiologically governed as well. Understanding how food will impact physiological reactions and subsequent emotional reactions can help to develop a plan for minimizing emotional “binges.” Even the most determined, strict, and diligent bodybuilder, who is preparing for a competition and is under an incredibly stringent food intake plan, can struggle under pressure and end up eating to satisfy more than a biological need to quell hunger.

As you begin your journey to understanding yourself and your relationship with food, I encourage you to ask yourself the following questions:

1. When do I eat? I often have my clients fill out a daily food log in order to glean some physically AND emotionally valuable information. See sample food log below.

Time	Place	Food	Macros	Feeling

Through completion of this log you can begin to establish patterns in regards to specific times that may be troubling, places and situations with certain people, trigger foods, how much is being consumed, and finally, what feeling or emotion was being experienced when food was eaten.

Julie would come to me session after session, berating herself for “eating M&Ms again” and feeling like they were controlling her. She would eat them at home, where no one else was around. She lived alone, “so I didn’t have to worry about people seeing me be bad,” she explained. This last statement triggered something for me, and I asked her, “How often do you bring your M&Ms to work and eat them?” “Oh, never!” she responded. “I wouldn’t want anyone to see me eating them. They are my secret!” And this is where her behavior began to shift... she was putting so much emphasis on HER M&Ms, GIVING them so much power yet feeling so overpowered by THEM. Ever had a secret? Does it not burn a hole inside of you because you want to badly to tell someone? Her homework was to take a bag of M&Ms to work and put it right on her desk for everyone to see. She was scared to death. What would people say? What would they think? Valuable information. What was this pre-occupation with the *possible* thoughts or reactions or assumptions by others? My point is this: she was walking into a feeling of being controlled by this food as a result of her own emphasis put on it and her need to keep it a secret...for reasons revolving around insecurity and lack of confidence, leading to uncomfortable emotions. She could see the cycle now!

2. What are my eating triggers? Use episodes from the past to identify the most difficult emotions, people, places, thoughts, etc. that have lead to emotional eating.
3. When you are in these situations, what alternative behaviors can I engage in? For example, when you are feeling sad, you can go for a walk. When you are frustrated, you can go to the gym and take a spinning class to work it off! Create a note card that you carry with you that you can reference when you notice you’re feeling uncomfortable. Obviously you will want to choose activities appropriate for your current surroundings, i.e. work, home, church.
4. How can I reframe the negative thoughts to be more positive and less likely to create negative emotions? Thoughts often lead to emotions, which lead to a specific action. If you can practice a new way of thinking, you may be able to bypass the emotion and thus the damaging behavior. For example, imagine that your boss approaches you at the end of a difficult and taxing day at work and comments, “Your presentation today felt a bit flat. I was hoping for something more lively and entertaining.” You might automatically feel discouraged and disappointed in yourself, leaving work with a sense of dread, thinking, “I’m going to lose my job, I just know it.” Hello! Did your boss say you were up against the firing squad? When thoughts like this pop into your head, the best thing you can do is make a conscious effort to STOP THEM! Say it if you have to: “STOP!” And then ask yourself where the evidence is that it’s true. Next, identify all the reasons why this is silly and the evidence for the exact opposite (i.e. I am a good employee because...) Practice enough, and you will notice how profoundly negative thinking affects you. You will get very adept at turning your thoughts around! Just so you know, I do this in the car when I’m driving. Okay, I admit it, I suffer from a bit of road rage! My thought: “probably some stupid old person who needs his license taken away”...(yes, I know this is horrible). I can feel my heart rate climbing and a feeling of frustration beginning. So I say out loud, “Kori, stop it. What’s the rush? Relax and breathe, take this time to be calm!” It works if you want it to.
5. Have I acknowledged what I’m experiencing. Again, it may help to say it out loud. Make it real, and give it a voice. “I’m feeling very pressured right now. This

isn't comfortable. I feel like eating a big slice of cake." Then rather than raiding the frig, examine where those feelings are coming from. What just happened? Who is around you? What was the trigger?

6. Am I making a conscious decision, and am I aware? Remembering that it is always a choice when we eat can help us to slow down and be more present. You might choose to journal your thoughts and feelings to aid in better awareness. Being able to review what you wrote in previous entries can be very enlightening and may spark some ideas as to how you might help yourself the next time you experience something similar.
7. Am I being good to myself? Treat yourself like you would a dear friend or family member. If you make a poor decision, rather than berating yourself, admit that you made a poor decision, plan for how you can do it differently the next time, and move on. You wouldn't continue telling your friend how worthless he/she is, would you?
8. Am I hungry? If you are not eating balanced meals, it makes sense that you will experience cravings that you may mistake for emotional triggers. Take a look at how often and in what proportions you are eating your calories. Don't deprive yourself, but take a moment if you have a craving to ask yourself if you really want the food. Cravings can be quickly fleeting.

You are worth taking the time to reflect on your habits, analyze your behaviors, and plan for more functional choices. Accept the challenge to understand the meaning of your behaviors and gain confidence at the same time. Use these tips to discover the reasoning behind your behavior in other areas of your life as well.