



# IS EMOTIONAL EATING SABOTAGING YOUR WEIGHT LOSS?

by Dr. Anne Mitchell, ND

**It's been one of those days... You've peeked into the refrigerator three times since lunch. You think you want something to eat but can't decide what. Sound familiar? How about ice cream, chips, or leftover birthday cake? You have this sense of yearning, not quite satisfied, and food sounds like an easy answer...**

**W**e have all been there... feeling blue, grabbing unhealthy food to soften the mood. In reality, the hunger isn't from your stomach — *it's inside your heart!*

Many people ask... "If I'm focused on weight loss, why do I keep making bad food choices?" "Why do I sabotage my diet or myself?" Consciously you may be serious about losing weight and have put things in place to succeed. Subcon-

sciously you may not be ready and unresolved emotions can hinder achievement. Sometimes even the best laid healthy-eating plans fail. Sometimes it's not really about food at all.

The average dieter begins and breaks four diets a year. Only one in every 100 people succeeds in losing weight permanently. The problem is most diets concentrate on foods you can/cannot eat, and completely ignore the emotions

around food. If everyone soothed themselves with fresh fruit and vegetables it wouldn't be so bad. But we're grabbing candy, cookies, macaroni and cheese, french fries... and that's due to biology. It turns out bodies are hard-wired to make you pass by the salad bar and head straight for the bakery aisle instead. When eating carbohydrates high in sugar or fat (like brownies or cinnamon rolls), your body releases the chemical dopamine. This stimulates the brain's pleasure center, so you keep eating to repeat the experience again and again. If not after carbohydrates you likely crave sugar and fats, overconsumption of which ups other brain chemicals linked to pleasure and euphoria.

With awareness, you can stop emotional eating patterns. The key is breaking the automatic connection between food and mood, learning to identify when you're eating for reasons having nothing to do with your stomach, and getting pleasure from other things, like exercise and friendship.

## Recognizing heart hunger

With heart hunger, you don't usually get specific food cravings — you just start thinking about eating. While searching the cupboards or refrigerator you're unsure of what sounds good at the moment. You just know you want "something." Emotional eating is common, partly because many people are comforted with food during childhood. When upset, an adult may say, "You'll feel better if you eat something," and then offer milk and cookies. Occasions like fairs or dinner at Grandma's feel better because of the food. The pattern is learned in the nervous system and brain, so when those children become adults, they continue seeking comfort from food. Food can be like a drug and take the edge off whatever is going on, similar to a drink for an alcoholic.

Heart hunger usually stems from emotions of emptiness, such as depression, discouragement or loneliness. It can appear during boredom or restlessness, times of hurt or disappointment. Heart hunger may be experienced when longing for attention or appreciation. Food is sometimes used to dull suffering and emotional pain or avoid confrontation. Many people weren't taught how to stand up for themselves or self-soothe and lack the coping mechanisms needed to deal with life's struggles.

## Will eating change it?

Food won't fix a hungry heart or change life's trials. Many people expect instant gratification and food seems to provide that quick fix. You may feel better for a while, but those troubled feelings will come back. After binging you may feel anger and/or guilt, and then eat more to deal with that distress. It can be a vicious cycle. If avoiding feelings, emotional hunger will continue to grow along with your waistline. The first step is to recognize that truly nourishing the self has little to do with food and everything to do with love for self and others.

## Tips to stop emotional eating and feed your hungry heart

- Thinking about eating? Ask "Am I truly physically hungry?"
- Ask "What's making me feel empty right now? Am I feeling/suppressing a particular emotion?"
- Give feelings a voice. Speak out loud, even if to yourself.
- If experiencing trouble accessing emotions, consider seeing a therapist or life coach.
- Realize that keeping feelings bottled up only makes it worse.
- Be kind to yourself and sensitive to your needs.
- At the first signs of heart hunger, seek out what is nurturing or comforting, such as a warm bath or massage. When sad or lonely, find solace in music. Enjoy reading a good book or creating (e.g.: needlework). If bored, consider taking up a new hobby or class. Take nurturing breaks during the day to renew your spirit instead of harming your waistline.
- Build a list of alternatives to heart-hungry eating.
- "Don't try harder, try different." People sometimes feel they could control emotional eating if they tried harder. Emotional eating is a pattern that can be broken, just like other unhealthy habits, but it is a process and takes work. The emotional eating itself can be a source of stress, so breaking the pattern creates a win-win situation.
- Keep a journal to identify food triggers and patterns. Note feelings before and after eating.
- Aim for managing/lowering stress with healthful strategies, including regular exercise, adequate rest and support from friends and family.
- Practice eating mindfully, paying focused attention without judgment. This technique can help increase awareness of sensations, feelings and thoughts connected with food. Turn off the TV, pay attention to your plate, avoid shoveling food, eat slowly, and chew thoroughly.

*Dr. Anne Mitchell/The Life Center offer tools for releasing behavior patterns that prevent healthy living. The Life Diet, a medically supervised whole foods eating plan (covered by most insurances), is designed for each client's metabolism and includes counseling/emotional support to facilitate healthy weight maintenance goals. Locations: 2 Broadway, North Haven, and 1007 Farmington Avenue, Suite 7, West Hartford, CT, 203.239.3400, [alifecenter@yahoo.com](mailto:alifecenter@yahoo.com).*