Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Impulsive Eating: Strategies for Preventing the Binge



Despite the fact that food is our bodies' fuel, many people feel driven to eat even when they're not hungry. People who eat impulsively come to accept this behavior as something that they'll need to control forever. Unfortunately, our society has become so obsessed with food and weight that eating impulsively is no longer considered abnormal. These days you could even say it's rare to find someone who has a natural relationship with food.

What is Impulsive Eating?

If you eat when you're not hungry, or find yourself obsessing about thoughts of food and weight when you're not hungry, you are, by definition, an impulsive eater. As an impulsive eater you probably spend a lot of time thinking about how to control your urges to eat. Most impulsive eaters feel virtuous when they resist and hate themselves when they don't.

Why Do People Eat Impulsively?

Some people start eating impulsively because — having dieted all their life — they feel deprived. Others try to fill an emotional need with food. Many impulsive eaters eat when they feel anxiety, loneliness, boredom or conflict to comfort or calm themselves. Food becomes a cure-all, rather than a fuel.

Impulsive eaters are not all fat, out of control, food addicts with deep-seated emotional problems. Like all people, impulsive eaters come in all shapes and sizes and have varying abilities to deal with their emotions.

What is a Normal Relationship with Food?

People who have a normal relationship with food eat when they're hungry and stop when they're full. They have no rules around when, how much or what they're "allowed" to eat. Sometimes they eat too much or eat for no reason, but most of the time they eat in response to their body cues. They like food, but aren't controlled by it and use phrases like, "I'm hungry," or, "I've had enough."

What is the Solution?

People generally eat impulsively because they deprive themselves of food and/or use food to fill an emotional need. No amount of restraint or relearning will change this. If you reach for food to comfort or console yourself, recognize that there's a deeper issue you need to address.

The heart of the cure is to put food back where it belongs in your life. You can start by reconnecting with your hunger.

Re-Connecting with Hunger

We are born knowing what and how much we need to eat to meet our growth potential. Our bodies have an instinctive sense of this. It changes from day to day. If you ignore your hunger cues, your body learns

to operate on less fuel and conserves energy by lowering your metabolic rate. If you start listening to your body, and eating when you're truly hungry, your body will crank its metabolic rate back up to its genetically designed level.

Eating when you're hungry has a calming effect. As babies, we cry when we're hungry and are quiet and happy when satisfied. If not fed, babies feel panicked and anxious. Adults have the same response: not eating makes it hard to deal with emotionally challenging situations that arise throughout the day.

Some people are so out of touch with their hunger that they can't recognize its cues. When you don't respond to hunger you'll also find it hard to know when you're full. The better you are at responding to your hunger, the better you'll be at recognizing when you're full.

Tips for Reconnecting with Your Hunger

Don't diet. Diets say, "don't eat" so they rarely work. Starting a diet is rooted in negative feelings about yourself. Research shows that diets eventually lead to bingeing. Bingeing causes even greater negative feelings about yourself: the diet-binge cycle is born. It's no accident that 98 per cent of people who diet can't maintain the weight lost. Not because millions of people are weak or deficient, but because dieting inherently ensures failure.

Accept your body and its size. Challenge the cultural ideal. Imagine some strange gas has been released into the earth's atmosphere. The moment you inhale this gas it becomes impossible to gain or lose weight.

Now everyone on earth will remain the size and weight they currently are. Ask yourself how you'd live your life differently. Start by getting rid of your scale and "cleaning out" your emotional closet.

Determine if you are physically or emotionally hungry when you eat. If you eat when emotional tell yourself it's OK to be upset and ask yourself what you need. Identify your emotions and investigate possible solutions.

Legalize foods. There are no "good" and "bad" foods. All foods are equal. When you label foods as "bad" and then eat them, you internalize the message that you are bad. Guilt and anxiety feed the cycle of deprivation and over-consumption. Because you restrict and deny yourself of so-called "bad foods" when dieting, it triggers overeating and binges. When you give yourself permission to eat everything, foods that you used to deny yourself will have no power over you.

Eat what you want. When you eat what you want you'll be satisfied—a feeling extremely important in preventing impulsive eating.

Stop eating when you feel satisfied. Don't eat until you're overstuffed. Check in with yourself throughout the meal and remind yourself that you can have more later.

Don't feel guilty. When you catch yourself feeling guilty about what you ate or want to eat, remember that restricting yourself is punishment. And the more restrictive you are, the worse you'll feel.

Eat when you're hungry, regardless of the time. Let go of scheduled mealtime eating and find your natural hunger pattern. Most people typically get hungry every two to four hours. Those who most often eat impulsively, try to avoid eating or ignore their hunger all day. They believe that food and hunger are the enemy. Usually though, it backfires and they end up being so hungry that they can't make conscious, rational decisions about food and binge.

Try using this hunger scale. Think of your hunger on a scale of 0-5. It's normal to want to snack at a 1-2 on the hunger scale and want a meal at a 3-4 on the hunger scale.

- **0 = No hunger or satisfied.**

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- **1 = Mild hunger.** Cues: fleeting thought of food, awareness that you'll need to eat.
- **2 = Mild to moderate hunger.** Cues: being distracted from what you're doing by thoughts of food, may need a snack if you are going to make it for another hour or two.
- **3 = Moderate hunger.** Cues: decreased concentration and beginning to feel irritable. Stomach feels empty and fatigue starts to set in. You need to eat now.
- **4 = Moderate to extreme hunger.** Cues: stomach may growl, may feel intolerant of others, may begin to develop a headache and feel very tired. You must eat now.
- **5 = Extreme hunger.** Cues: nausea, headache, and sleepiness.

Eat breakfast.

Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. It kick starts your metabolism. Most people find when they eat breakfast, they're hungrier during the day. This is a good thing as it means your metabolic rate is speeding up. Eat in response to your hunger throughout the day.

Refer food guides for healthy eating. Plan a nutritionally balanced diet and learn what an appropriate amount of food is. Seek a registered dietitian's advice to help with the interpretation of the guide if necessary.

Eat a serving of protein rich foods with lunch and dinner. Protein takes longer to digest, keeps your blood sugar levels normal for longer, and helps you to feel a greater sense of satisfaction throughout the day. Examples of these foods are: meat, fish, chicken, eggs, beans, lentils, soy products, nuts and seeds. A serving is the equivalent of 2-3 oz or 50-100g.

Plan to eat before you leave work. Right after work is the most vulnerable time for impulsive eating. Prevent it by having a snack in the late afternoon.

Work on underlying issues. You'll always return to food if you don't deal with the source of your problem. Consider contacting a professional to learn more about counseling.

Normalizing your relationship with food will take time. Set small, doable goals, frame them in positive language and give yourself positive feedback. "I need to add more fruit and vegetables to my diet," works better than, "I need to stop eating chocolate." It sends a whole different message. Be kind to yourself and don't expect to be perfect. By experimenting and learning from your experiences, you'll come to know what works best for you.

Impulsive eaters are offered endless lists of tips and tricks to control food intake. Unfortunately, most of these solutions actually create bigger problems. The key to curing impulsive eating is to put food back where it belongs in your life. Reconnect with your hunger. Start by banishing diets, and working on body and size acceptance. Stop criminalizing food. Recognize that there are no "good" and "evil" foods and allow yourself to eat without feeling guilty.