

# Helping you with EMOTIONAL EATING

This guide aims to help you understand what emotional eating is and to help you learn strategies for managing your response to emotional situations without having to rely just on food.



## ? What is emotional or 'comfort' eating?

Emotional or 'comfort' eating refers to times when people eat, not because of physical hunger, but in response to emotions. These emotions may be 'negative' such as sadness, anger, boredom or frustration or 'positive' emotions such as happiness. The main goal of 'comfort' eating is to cope with or often avoid feeling strong emotions in the short-term.

## How can you tell if you are emotionally hungry and not physically hungry?

Some people report they are not sure whether they are physically or emotionally hungry. The signs of these two types of hunger are very different.

### The signs of emotional hunger:

- Develops suddenly
- Not connected to a time of meal
- Triggered by an emotionally charged event
- Stays with you even though you are not hungry
- Eating leads to feelings of guilt and shame

### The signs of physical hunger:

- Builds gradually
- Below the neck (e.g. growling stomach)
- Happens 3-4 hours after eating a meal
- Eating leads to feeling satisfied
- Goes away when satisfied

Learning to tell the difference between physical and emotional hunger is important, as knowing what your body or mind needs allows you to then give each need what it requires.

It is important to be aware about what happens when you try and manage your feelings by eating food.

## Which emotions do you tend to eat in response to?

The first step in attempting to manage emotional eating is to try and understand it a bit more. Think about the last time this happened and answer the questions below.

*What was the emotion? And what triggered this?*

*When do you think this happens? (i.e. Where were you? With whom?)*

## Is it possible to break the cycle of eating food to manage emotions?

For anyone struggling with emotional eating the responses can happen automatically and they are not always aware of their eating behaviours at the time. They may only realise what they have done after they have finished eating.

Although you may not feel like this at the moment, it is possible to experience negative or positive emotions and not eat in response. Finding ways to prevent eating as a response to an emotion can help with weight-loss goals.

## What can you do to manage your emotional eating?

The more you think about and understand your feelings the more you will be able to see how they affect your life, and then you can do something about it. There is no one or right way to cope with difficult emotions but having a range of coping skills we can draw on can be helpful to limit emotional eating e.g. relaxation breathing, exercise and hobbies. Expressing our feelings in more helpful ways can also help e.g. talking to someone or writing a journal, or learning to accept difficult emotions as normal reactions to challenging situations.

It is important to be aware about what happens when you try to manage your feelings by eating food.

### Think about:

- Does it make you feel better?
- If so, how long does this last?
- How do you feel after overeating?
- Does it help with your weight loss goal?

# A step by step guide to managing emotional eating

## Step 1: identify your triggers.

Spend some time trying to first identify what leads you to overeat.

1

## Step 2: reduce the trigger.

Is it possible to remove or reduce the cause for emotional eating? If so, this would help to decrease the overeating that may happen after the trigger.

2

## Step 3: plan.

Plan which emotion you are going to try and manage without using food in an unhelpful way. Pick an emotion that is 'easier' to manage as this will give you the confidence to try to deal with more difficult ones in the future.

3

## Step 4: make a list.

Write down a list of strategies that help you manage your emotions in a helpful way. Some strategies that others have found useful include going for a gentle walk, exercising, reading, watching a favourite show, taking a relaxing bath, listening to music, talking to a friend or family member, or writing in a diary. Learning to accept difficult emotions as normal reactions to challenging situations may help the intensity of these emotions reduce with time. It may require trial and error before you discover the specific ideas that work for you.

4

## Other ideas people have used are:

**Don't deprive yourself** – consider whether keeping the 'comfort' food but eating it in smaller amounts works for you. The key will be to plan in advance what you will reduce the amount to and only have that amount available when you know that you are likely to overeat. Take time to eat food in smaller amounts and give yourself permission to enjoy it too.

**Keep calm:** think about what makes you feel calm when you are feeling emotional and at risk of overeating. This could be deep breathing, or a relaxation clip or useful apps such as: [www.nhs.uk/oneyou](http://www.nhs.uk/oneyou)

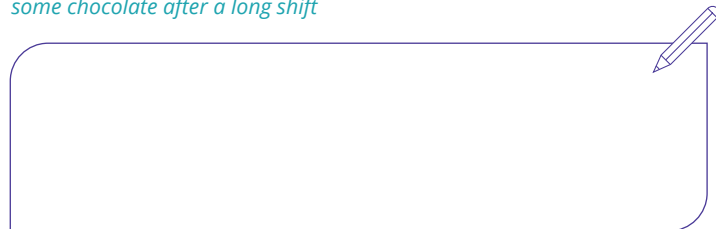


## Write down your ideas to help you to manage your emotions

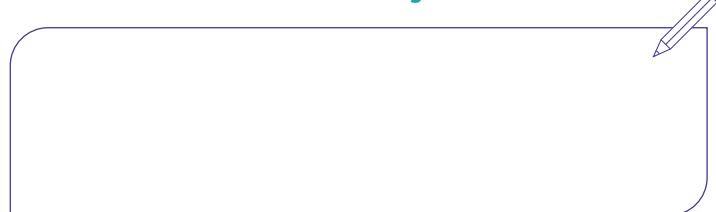
### What are the emotions that trigger eating for you?

- Are there times when you feel too stressed to stick to your eating plan?
- Do you eat more when you feel low in mood?
- Do you eat through boredom or other non-hunger reasons?

Example: Feeling stressed at work, so had a glass of wine and some chocolate after a long shift

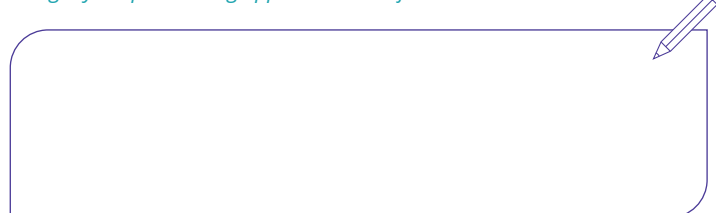


### How do I feel after emotional eating?



### What is the best way for me to manage better?

Example: Will start to manage my stress by writing down my feelings and using my deep breathing app to make me feel calmer and more in control



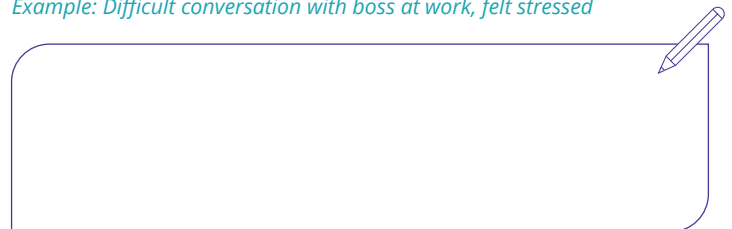
If you think that you would benefit from additional support please ask your healthcare professional to see what further help may be available.

## So, which ideas are working for you?

It is important to monitor what works for you and use this to help you move forward.

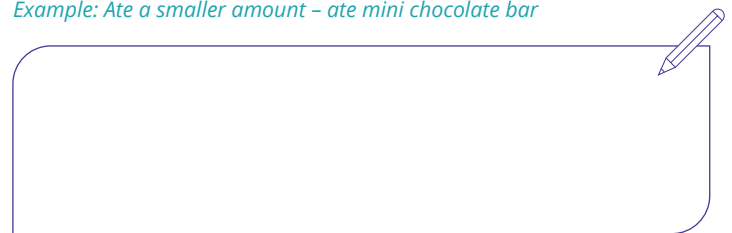
### What happened?

Example: Difficult conversation with boss at work, felt stressed



### What did you do?

Example: Ate a smaller amount – ate mini chocolate bar



### How well did it work?

Example: I felt a little bit better, might need to take the dog for a walk next time too



## Acknowledgements

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