

Emotional eating

Of all the psychological factors affecting when and what we eat, emotions are one of the strongest. **Jennifer Kang** investigates emotional eating – why and how it occurs and the best ways to combat its effects

After an emotional ordeal do you find yourself choosing comfort over nutritious virtue – a side of fries over roasted pumpkin, or cake over a handful of berries? Or do you, without second thought or hesitation, head straight for a bag of chips to relieve yourself of boredom, stress or sadness?

The tendency to resort to food in response to emotional triggers, particularly emotional distress, is identified as emotional eating and there's no denying many of us have at some point indulged in comfort foods in response to upsets at work or in relationships.

"In our modern world, where food is everywhere, where snacking is encouraged and where advertising overtly promotes emotional eating, we all eat emotionally," psychologist Louise Adams says.

However, while emotional eating may be an occasional and temporary way of seeking short-term relief, it can become troublesome both

psychologically and nutritionally if left to become a habitual way of dealing with emotional turmoil.

A closer look

Emotional eating occurs in the absence of physical hunger and according to psychologists, can be categorised as an 'avoidance coping' strategy.

Emotional eaters typically eat food they enjoyed during childhood as well as high-fat or high-sugar snacks, which trigger a serotonin response in the brain, causing the emotional eater to experience pleasure while eating.

Doctoral candidate in psychology at Monash University Emma Gallagher is coordinating a study to help individuals struggling with their weight. She says many emotional eaters want to escape unpleasant emotions such as sadness or stress and instead of dealing with and addressing these emotions, eat to feel better, which seems to work in the short-term.

"But usually not for long – maybe a few minutes – so in the long-term, it isn't a very helpful strategy and actually tends to compound distress," Gallagher says.

Why we resort to food for comfort can

"Remember, we all emotionally eat, or eat when we are not hungry, some of the time. It's only a problem if it is interfering with the quality of your life or your health," psychologist Louise Adams says.



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be attributed to our everyday methods of dealing with problems. When faced with a predicament, we feel inclined to fix the problem or eliminate it, but avoiding it is usually an easy and tempting option.

However, you're probably familiar with what happens when you avoid a problem you can't escape, and Gallagher says research shows avoiding internal experiences such as thoughts and emotions does not work and actually acts to increase original distress.

Those of us who eat to avoid a difficult situation or negative emotion feel better temporarily, but then feel worse because not only has the original distress not gone away, but additional distress has been added, usually in the form of guilt.

Discomfort on your plate

If you're piling your plate with guilty pleasures, you're also bound to be compromising the nutritious value of your eating patterns – an aspect of emotional eating that is given less attention than its psychological factors.

In emotional eating, comfort is always preferred over nutrition and this can lead to a range of deficiencies. Emotional eaters indulge in too much of one food group, typically fat and sugar-laden foods, which means they don't have a balanced and varied diet.

Emotional eating can also result in overeating.

"Given emotional eating is related to eating in the absence of physiological hunger, it is most likely that people who engage in emotional eating are eating more than their recommended

daily energy intake, which is likely to lead to weight gain and increases in body mass index," Gallagher says.

Gallagher says despite our occasional reluctance to accept BMI as an indicator of physical health, evidence shows there is an association between higher BMI scores and poorer health outcomes for individuals.

Emotional eaters are also at risk of becoming overweight or obese, which is related to developing or exacerbating health problems such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and hypertension.

"I see lots of clients struggling with their physical health as a result of emotional eating – they have problems such as insulin resistance, diabetes and high blood pressure," Adams says.

Emotional eating is also one of the biggest triggers for binge eating and even bulimia. Uncontrollable eating habits can also result in reduced self-esteem and body image issues, which again contributes to the cycle of eating to feel better.

Combat the comfort

There are a range of ways to distract yourself from unpleasant emotions using non-food related methods. Go for a walk – this will release serotonin (happy hormones) in the brain, or engage in a soothing activity other than eating – listen to meditative music.

Another strategy to lessen the impact of emotional eating is to

