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Emotional Eating by Bruce Daroff of the DCN Weight Loss Group

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The Basics of Emotional Eating

What is emotional eating?

Using food as a form of relief or reward and eating when you're upset, stressed, angry, tired, bored or sad. Emotional eating is using food too often to make yourself feel better.

#1 For emotional eaters, eating serves a psychological, as opposed to a biological, purpose. As long as you use food to control your emotions, you can't control your weight for very long.

How common is emotional eating?

#2 Everyone eats for emotional reasons once in a while, but when you habitually use food to deal with being upset rather than dealing directly with what is bothering you, you won't be able to separate physical hunger from an unrelenting emotional hunger.

You may lose weight for a little bit, but you'll regain it when life throws you a curve ball.

Why do you think we eat emotionally?

#3 We eat for relief and reward, because we've learned to rely on food to balance our emotional lives. We eat as a substitute for doing the sometimes frightening and difficult work of facing our feelings and taking risks.

We're afraid to let go of this emotional eating pattern because we're not sure we can learn other ways to manage our feelings. But of course, we can learn better ways to deal with life's challenges, which is the key to unlearning emotional eating.

What is a food trance?

You talk about a "food trance" in your book. What is that?

It is the pleasurable feeling that food provides. Food becomes enticing because it's transformed into a form of escape that works immediately.

What people don't realize is that this escape is addictive. We pay a high price for a very brief respite from stress.

What is your advice to emotional eaters?

#4 You must prove to yourself that you can manage uncomfortable feelings in ways that don't include the negative backlash that food does.

Start from the surface by observing what turns your hunger switch on, and pause long enough to think about what you're really hungry for, and whether there's a better way than food to get it.

In your book you mention that using food to deal with feelings creates a vicious cycle. What does that mean?

#5 A person feels bad about something, and she eats to feel better. She does feel better for a little while,

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but then she feels guilty and disgusted with the fact that she's overeaten and sabotaged her efforts to lose weight, which makes her feel a need to eat to feel better.

How does powerlessness affect emotional eating?

What does feeling powerless have to do with emotional eating?

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When you feel powerless to effect real change in your life, the hunger switch gets turned on. Feeling powerless is so intolerable that it sends people looking for a quick fix. And food is a readily accessible and legal way to cope with that feeling.

Are the underlying issues behind emotional eating the same for someone who has spent a lifetime battling obesity, and someone who just needs to lose 5, 10, 20 pounds?

The core issue of using food as an emotional prop is the same. But if a person has had a weight problem since childhood, or has become obese, deeper reasons are at play.

Once a person becomes overweight, the label can become part of her identity, and it makes her feel safe to stay that way, whereas becoming fit actually makes her temporarily anxious, and drives her back to overeating in order to get "fat-safe" again.

Many people carry emotional baggage, but not all of these people turn to food for comfort.

Why some and not others? It is not a matter of past history or emotional baggage; it's about overusing a bad mental habit of avoidance through food.

Some people avoid dealing with their life issues through substance abuse or distractions.

We must learn to stop using these avoidance mechanisms, and instead use the best and smartest part of our mind to deal with the many challenges of life that require us to solve problems, adapt, and take the risks necessary to make our lives work well.

Why can't we lose weight with diet alone?

For emotional eaters, why doesn't diet alone work for weight loss?

Emotional eaters cannot adhere to a diet for very long because they feel compelled to use food to manage their emotions.

That's when people break their diet and end up gaining 10 percent more than they lost, so their weight keeps increasing.

If dieters have a habit of using food to manage emotions, it is only a matter of time before they have a feeling that requires food to manage. That's why the message in *Shrink Yourself* is so critical to being able to make healthy food choices.

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You say weight loss is not just about food. Why?

Weight loss is about how you live your life. Making healthy food choices is a natural offshoot of that.

When you eat to fill yourself up emotionally, you won't ever get enough food because food can't satisfy emotional hunger.

What's the way to recovery?

First, recognize that emotional eating is an unhealthy habit you must address. By using the practices and insights in *Shrink Yourself*, you'll realize that you don't really NEED food in the way that you think you do.

HOW TO OVERCOME EMOTIONAL EATING

I WAS STUCK IN A SELF-DEFEATING CYCLE!

I felt out-of-control with food! I was either overeating or dieting. In either mode, I felt I was never good enough. I had willpower and stick-to-itiveness in many other areas in my life. So why couldn't I apply that same resolve to my eating habits?

I WASTED SO MUCH TIME, ENERGY, AND MONEY!

I was obsessed with my weight. Living like that was miserable. Today, I understand that weight was not my real problem. It was actually a symptom. My real problem was that I was an "emotional eater".

EMOTIONAL EATERS USE FOOD TO MANAGE FEELINGS

We use food to self-soothe. People who have struggled with it, and the professionals who treat it, call it by many different names; compulsive overeating, emotional eating, and food addiction. No matter what it's called, people USE food because food works!

1. FOOD WORKS AS A TENSION RELIEVER


Both eating and thinking about eating work as distractions from uncomfortable feelings. Being food focused takes the edge off any feeling that a person would rather not feel or tolerate (boredom, stress, anxiety, anger, loneliness, etc.).

For example...You're feeling bored. Suddenly you find yourself thinking about the ice cream in the freezer. As soon as you start to think about the ice cream, you are no longer focused on feeling bored.

Food and food thoughts can be used in reaction to and as a defense against any intense feeling or stressful life situation. The use of food to manage mood becomes a self-reinforcing habit. (Today, scientists are also focused on the biology and brain chemistry of overeating. There may also be many physiological reasons why we keep turning to food, even though it feels self-defeating to do so?)

2. EMOTIONAL EATING HAPPENS ON A CONTINUUM

Emotional eating is normal. We all celebrate with food. When something sad occurs, friends and neighbors arrive with cakes and casseroles. It's only when emotional eating begins to have impact on one's emotional and/or physical well-being, and it's used as a person's primary strategy for mood regulation, that it becomes a problem.



When eating becomes a primary coping strategy, it greatly impacts a person's quality of life. At the most extreme point on the emotional eating continuum, there may be a diagnosable eating disorder present - such as bulimia or binge eating disorder - and often, clinical depression as well.

3. FOOD, AS A MOOD REGULATOR, ALWAYS BETRAYS US

First, an emotional eater experiences an uncomfortable feeling. For example...You just had a fight with a family member and you're feeling really angry!

Next, you have a FOOD THOUGHT; and you find yourself reaching for a bag of chips. Note...you may or may not be conscious of when or why you are having a food thought.) Once you are focused on the chips, you are no longer focused on how angry you feel. The use of food as a distraction works...

You eat the chips, warding off the anger for a little while. Then, the anger comes back. Now, in addition to the anger, an emotional overeater has to deal with the guilt and shame he/she feels every time he or she eats chips (or any other food that he or she has labeled "forbidden").

4. THIS FRUSTRATING CYCLE IS A TRAP FOR EMOTIONAL EATERS

Until you develop healthier coping strategies, the only way to avoid the guilt and the shame that results from emotional overeating--is more emotional overeating! Every time we swear we'll be "good" on our diet today, and then turn back to food for comfort, we feel like we have "failed". Then, to "stuff down" our frustration, or anger, or desperation, we turn back to food.

5. SO, WHAT CAN YOU DO IF EMOTIONAL EATING IS A PROBLEM?

Make a conscious effort to become more aware of how and why you may be using food. Develop new skills for mood regulation. If you need support to do so, find appropriate professional help (find a class, hire a Coach or a Licensed

Psychotherapist). The focus should be on self-care and improved emotional and physical well-being—eating well and being fit—not on dieting and weight loss. Remember, dieting is a trap for an emotional eater. Dieting just leads to more emotional eating.

LOOK

#1. ASK YOURSELF, "ARE YOU AN EMOTIONAL EATER?"

Emotional eating is the troublesome use of food to take care of emotional needs (to manage stress, boredom, anxiety, anger, loneliness, etc.). Here's how emotional eating works...

Food and "food thoughts" are used as distractions from uncomfortable feelings. For example... you have a fight with a family member or with your boss. Suddenly, you find yourself thinking about the chocolate candy in the cupboard or in the candy machine down the hall. As soon as you start thinking about the chocolate, you are no longer focused on how angry you feel. People use food thoughts and food because doing so helps them manage their mood.

#2. RECOGNIZE "EMOTIONAL EATING"

10 When you reach for food, ask yourself, "Am I turning to food to meet a physical need—am I really hungry? Or, am I focusing on food to avoid feeling bored, stressed, angry, lonely, etc.?"

#3. STOP DIETING AND STOP WEIGHING YOURSELF!

11 Diets don't work! Food restriction sets an emotional eater up for more emotional eating... and the scale makes people crazy! Why give a scale that kind of power. Get rid of it. (If you absolutely must monitor your ups and downs, the fit of your clothes will tell you everything you want to know.)

#4. EXPLORE WHY YOU ARE SO OBSESSED WITH WEIGHT

Does this sound familiar? "If I could just lose weight, I'd be happy."

Think about that. Is your life really that simple or one-dimensional? Or, is it possible that your focus on your weight gives you an illusion of control? Blaming all of life's disappointments on weight, body shape or size, can feel safer than taking a good, long, honest look at other life issues-like your relationship skills, your feelings about emotional and/or sexual intimacy, personal or career change, etc.

#5. DEVELOP NEW SKILLS AND HEALTHIER COPING STRATEGIES

The use of food to manage mood is a self-reinforcing behavior. Somewhere along the way (consciously or unconsciously), you tried it and it worked. You learned that it worked; therefore, it became a habit.

The good news is you can now consciously learn new, healthier habits for emotional regulation (take a class, hire a coach, or work with a counselor who specializes in emotional eating and mood regulation issues).

#6. SHIFT YOUR FOCUS TO SELF-CARE

Develop an extensive Self-Care List. On it, list everything you can think of that gives you pleasure. (If you can't think of anything, explore new strategies. Ask other people what they do to manage stress, to self-nurture, and to have fun.)

Carry the list around with you. Pull it out every time you're tempted to use food to meet an emotional need. Eventually, these new habits that you're developing will begin to replace the old emotional eating habit and will feel much better in both the short and long runs.

For lasting behavioral change to occur, the focus must shift from dieting and weight loss--to self-care and a desire for improved health, eating well and being fit. Remember, dieting and deprivation are traps for an emotional eater. Self-Care is the way out.

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Emotional Eating: Feeding Your Feelings

Eating to feed a feeling, and not a growling stomach, is emotional eating.

When you're happy, your food of choice could be steak or pizza, when you're sad it could be ice cream or cookies, and when you're bored it could be potato chips. Food does more than fill our stomachs – it also satisfies feelings, and when you quench those feelings with comfort food when your stomach isn't growling, that's emotional eating.

"Emotional eating is eating for reasons other than hunger,"

What are the telltale signs of emotional eating, what foods are the most likely culprits when it comes to emotional eating, and how it can be overcome?

How to Tell the Difference

There are several differences between emotional hunger and physical hunger,

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1. Emotional hunger comes on suddenly; physical hunger occurs gradually.
 2. When you are eating to fill a void that isn't related to an empty stomach, you crave a specific food, such as pizza or ice cream, and only that food will meet your need. When you eat because you are actually hungry, you're open to options.
 3. Emotional hunger feels like it needs to be satisfied instantly with the food you crave; physical hunger can wait.
 4. Even when you are full, if you're eating to satisfy an emotional need, you're more likely to keep eating. When you're eating because you're hungry, you're more likely to stop when you're full.
 5. Emotional eating can leave behind feelings of guilt; eating when you are physically hungry does not.

Comfort Foods

When emotional hunger rumbles, one of its distinguishing characteristics is that you're focused on a particular food, which is likely a comfort food.

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"Comfort foods are foods a person eats to obtain or maintain a feeling," says Brian Wansink, PhD, director of the Food and Brand Lab at the University of Illinois. "Comfort foods are often wrongly associated with negative moods, and indeed, people often consume them when they're down or depressed, but interestingly enough, comfort foods are also consumed to maintain good moods."

Ice cream is first on the comfort food list. After ice cream, comfort foods break down by sex: For women it's chocolate and cookies; for men it's pizza, steak, and casserole, explains Wansink.

And what you reach for when eating to satisfy an emotion depends on the emotion. According to an article by Wansink, published in the July 2000 *American Demographics*, "The types of comfort foods a person is drawn toward varies depending on their mood. People in happy moods tended to prefer ... foods such as pizza or steak (32%). Sad people reached for ice cream and cookies 39% of the time, and 36% of bored people opened up a bag of potato chips."

"We all eat for emotional reasons sometimes," says Jakubczak, who has talked to college students at the University of Maryland about emotional eating.

When eating becomes the only or main strategy a person uses to manage emotions, explains Jakubczak, then problems arise -- especially if the foods a person is choosing to eat to satisfy emotions aren't exactly healthy.

"If you eat when you are not hungry, chances are your body does not need the calories," says Jakubczak. "If this happens too often, the extra calories get stored as fat, and too much fat storage can cause one to be overweight, which may present some health risks."

According to an interview with Jakubczak on the University of Maryland web site, 75% of overeating is caused by emotions, so dealing with emotions appropriately is important.

Recognizing Emotional Eating

"The first thing one needs to do to overcome emotional eating is to recognize it," says Jakubczak.

"Keeping a food record and ranking your hunger from 1-10 each time you put something in your mouth will bring to light 'if' and 'when' you are eating for reasons other than hunger."

Next, you need to learn techniques that help manage emotions besides eating, explains Jakubczak.

"Oftentimes when a child is sad, we cheer them up with a sweet treat," says Jakubczak. "This behavior gets reinforced year after year until we are practicing the same behavior as adults. We never learned how to deal with the sad feeling because we always pushed it away with a sweet treat. Learning how to deal with feelings without food is a new skill many of us need to learn."

Managing Emotional Eating

Here are a few tips to help you deal with emotional eating:

- Recognize emotional eating and learn what triggers this behavior in you.
- Make a list of things to do when you get the urge to eat and you're not hungry, and carry it with you, according to the Tufts Nutrition web site. When you feel overwhelmed, you can put off that desire by doing another enjoyable activity.
- Try taking a walk, calling a friend, playing cards, cleaning your room, doing laundry, or something productive to take your mind off the craving -- even taking a nap, according to the Tufts Nutrition web site.
- When you do get the urge to eat when you're not hungry, find a comfort food that's healthy instead of junk food. "Comfort foods don't need to be unhealthy," says Wansink.
- For some, leaving comfort foods behind when they're dieting can be emotionally difficult. Wansink tells WebMD, "The key is moderation, not elimination." He suggests dividing comfort foods into smaller portions. For instance, if you have a large bag of chips, divide it into smaller containers or baggies and the temptation to eat more than one serving can be avoided.
- When it comes to comfort foods that aren't always healthy, like fattening desserts, Wansink also offers this piece of information: "Your memory of a food peaks after about four bites, so if you only have those bites, a week later you'll recall it as just a good experience than if you polished off the

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