



Help with emotional overeating

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Do these sound familiar? “Doctor, I want to lose weight but I fail every diet” or “I want to lose weight but I just love food”. A seldom recognised but increasingly common source of failure to lose weight or unexplained weight gain is emotional overeating. This compulsive approach to eating, varies in regard to frequency and quantity of food consumed. For some people, emotional overeating may contribute to disordered eating and affect their day-to-day lives.

While hunger and appetite are the drivers for eating to fuel our body with energy and nutrients, many people eat purely because food tastes good and reasons other than physical hunger lead to food intake, including ‘emotional hunger’ and a desire for self pleasure. Regular food intake without the signals of physical hunger may be attributed to emotional overeating.

Key indicators of emotional overeating include:

- Habit that associates a particular activity with food consumption, such as watching TV and eating while not hungry.
- An emotional state such as stress, boredom and anxiety.
- Past traumas, such as being teased or bullied as a child for being “chubby” or otherwise not fitting in with peer groups.

Strategies for patients

You can assist patients to identify their triggers for emotional overeating and encourage them to implement change. Some useful strategies

recommended include encouraging your patients to:

- Focus on mindful eating. Eating is chomping your food twice, swallowing it and not even realising what you have just done! Mindful eating is “tasting” – being able to savour and enjoy every mouthful.
- Chewing well and eating slowly. Slowing down the pace of eating results in greater satisfaction with significantly less food and it allows the sense of fullness to occur as many obese people have a delayed satiety signal from a full stomach.
- Establish plans and goals.
- Distraction. Remove oneself from the ‘eating’ situation and distract with another activity such as physical exercise (e.g. a walk), which allows for the best of both worlds. A glass of water at the moment of hunger will help suppress the eating urge for some.
- Keep a food diary. This provides a dispassionate overview to the patient of

the style of food they consume and the surrounding circumstances. Food diary details can include foods eaten, place of eating, level of hunger, activities before and satisfaction achieved from eating. Even more detail can include nutrient content such as kilojoules, fat, carbohydrates and protein. They can try online food diary such as calorieking.com.au. An alternative for those who find a food diary too daunting would be to take a photo of each meal.

Assistance available to patients

Helpful options to assist patients overcome emotional overeating include:

- Assessment by an accredited practising dietitian and/or therapist
- Self-help books such as *If Not Dieting Then What?* by Dr Rick Kausman or *Weight Loss for Food Lovers* by Dr George Blair-West
- Hypnotherapy
- Overeaters Anonymous ■