

Solutions: Support for Emotional and Binge Eating

Session 17: Understanding Hunger and Emotional Eating

Check-In

- Identify at least one success and one challenge from the past week.
- Did you notice any fight/flight/freeze activation states this past week? Did you practice any somatic techniques for self-regulation?
- How can the group support you this week?

Quote of the Week

Emotional eating is an attempt to deal with a tough problem, feeling, or situation that we don't know how to deal with and may not know that we have without a symptom to remind us.

.....When we strip away the judgement of emotional eating, and stop calling it a disease, a defect, or a problem... **we can finally see it for what it is: An alert that something in our life needs our attention.** Something completely unrelated to food or our weight. Be grateful for the reminder. It might be saving your life.

-Isabel Foxen Duke

From Intuitive to Emotional Eating

Infants and young children have an intuitive sense of what and how much to eat and are tuned into the messages from their bodies.



As naturally intuitive eaters get older, the environment teaches unhelpful habits related to food and eating and the mind learns to override the body's cues.



The intuition we had as infants disappears under this pressure from many biopsychosocialcultural factors and food begins to serve many purposes (sooth, distract, procrastinate, numb, entertain, seduce, reward, and even to punish)

Discussion Question

What factors have moved you further away from intuitive eating?

- Food/eating rules
- Diets
- Weight Stigma
- Access to food
- Work schedules
- Cultural/Family norms
- Abundance exposure
- Sports

The Role of Emotional Eating in Your Life

Eating is naturally an emotional experience. It offers feelings of satisfaction and pleasure, as well as feeling connected with loved ones.

However, relying on food as a primary way to manage emotions can lead to feeling compelled to eat, eating to discomfort, or bingeing.

What feelings do you tend to use food to cope with?

The Role of Emotional Eating in Your Life

When it comes to emotional eating, it's not the feeling itself that causes you to eat. Rather, it's the difficulty with tolerating the feeling at a particular time that drives the urge to cope with food. Think of it as an issue with emotion regulation, not emotions themselves.

Discussion Question

How does food help you at times when you're having difficulty tolerating the emotions you identified from the previous question? *Feel free to add any additional functions food serves for you:*

- Soothe
- Calm
- Distract
- Comfort
- Numb
- _____

From: The Emotional Eating, Chronic Dieting, Binge Eating & Body Image Workbook (Matz, Pershing, & Harrison, 2024)

What are you *actually* hungry for?

When you notice you're reaching for food as an attempt to cope with emotions, ask yourself what else you might be hungry for, in addition to food.

(Are you lonely and hungry for connection? Bored and hungry for stimulation?)

We can use different emotion regulation strategies to meet our needs in the moment. These are NOT strategies for controlling your eating, but rather strategies to manage and tolerate emotional distress.

- Calm- light a candle or listen to music
- Comfort- connect with a pet or a friend
- Soothe- take a warm bath or spend some time in nature
- Distract- read a book or complete a puzzle
- Numb- go to sleep

From: The Emotional Eating, Chronic Dieting, Binge Eating & Body Image Workbook (Matz, Pershing, & Harrison, 2024)

What are you *actually* hungry for?

After identifying the need, try other ways of meeting it. If you're not able to respond to your emotions and meet your needs differently, remember:

- Food will always be an option to cope with feelings.
- There are good reasons why you still use food to cope- it works!
- Developing new ways of coping takes time.

From: The Emotional Eating, Chronic Dieting, Binge Eating & Body Image Workbook (Matz, Pershing, & Harrison, 2024)

Regaining Intuitive Eating

Can we regain our natural intuition with food?

YES!

But to do this, we must reconnect our mind with our body. With mindfulness and self-attunement, we can begin to untangle and separate these different experiences of hunger and learn to recognize and meet our needs effectively.

Your Hunger Cues- How do you know when you're hungry?

Make a list of any hunger signals you experience. These can include physical sensations, thoughts, and feelings.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

The Hunger Scale



I'm SO hungry! I need to eat NOW!

I'm definitely hungry and could eat a lot of food.

I'm hungry and ready to eat delicious food.

I could eat now, but could also wait a little longer.

I am not hungry or full.

I'm not really hungry anymore, but I could eat more.

That was good! I'm feeling great after eating that.

That food was so delicious, I even ate a little extra.

I may have eaten a little much and my stomach is starting to hurt.

I'm so full my stomach feels very painful.

Using the Hunger Scale

- The hunger scale can help you tune in and connect with your sensations of hunger and fullness.
- When you register feeling hungry, ask yourself how hungry you feel with the hunger scale above.
- Most people feel comfortable beginning to eat at a 3 and finishing eating at a 7.
- It's normal to get into the 1-2 and 8-10 ranges at times. Respond to these hunger ratings with extra care and compassion!

Honoring Hunger Cues

Consider eating when you feel somewhat hungry or hungry- this is your body telling you it needs nourishment before the hunger becomes overpowering.

Challenges to honoring hunger (identify which you relate to):

- I don't notice hunger until I'm ravenous.
- Experiencing hunger is uncomfortable due to distress from past experiences of dieting or food insecurity.
- I'm neurodivergent and struggle to identify internal cues.
- I have frequent binges or emotional eating episodes, so I often don't get hungry.
- My medication interferes with hunger cues.
- I have a trauma history and disconnecting from my body is still a way I survive.
- Other _____

Honoring Fullness Cues with AIM

- **Attunement:** Reconnecting with your body and increasing satisfaction when you eat. Examples- asking yourself “Am I hungry?” and “What am I hungry for?”
- **Intention:** Before eating, consider how you want to feel on the fullness side of the hunger scale when you’re done eating and the amount of food you think you’ll need to get there. After eating, check in with your body non-judgmentally and notice if you’re at the level of fullness you wanted to be at. If not, consider if you were hungrier than you thought or if any forms of restriction drove you to eat more.
- **Mindfulness:** Notice how food tastes and feels in your body without judgment. Let go of any thoughts that stop you from being present with food (calorie or point counting, rules about whether you’re “allowed” to eat).

What is Mindful Eating?

Eating with the intention of caring for yourself and with the attention necessary for noticing and enjoying your food, along with its effects on your body.

Mindful eating encompasses...

- Awareness of your physical and emotional cues.
- Recognition of your non-hunger triggers for eating.
- Learning to meet your other needs in more effective ways than eating.
- Choosing food for both enjoyment and nourishment.
- Eating for optimal satisfaction and satiety.
- Using the fuel you've consumed to live the vibrant life you crave.

Keep in
mind...

Only food will satisfy *physical* hunger. However, there are many alternatives to food for satisfying *emotional* hunger.

6 Easy Guidelines for Mindful Eating



Eat Slowly



Eat enough to satisfy your hunger



Give your body the energy it needs



Find a satisfying & appealing substitute



Out of sight, out of mind



Balance inner critic with loving kindness

Discussion Question

What skills can I use to minimize emotional eating and begin to regain trust in intuitive eating?

Any last thoughts or questions?

Different Types of Hunger

- Physical Hunger (stomach hunger)
- Emotional Hunger (head hunger)

Emotional vs. Physical Hunger

Emotional Hunger

- Sudden
- For a specific food
- Above the neck
- Urgent
- Paired w/ upsetting emotion
- Automatic/absent-minded eating
- No response to fullness
- Guilt about eating

Physical Hunger

- Gradual
- Open to different foods
- Based in the stomach
- Patient
- Occurs out of physical need
- Deliberate choices/awareness
- Stops eating when satisfied
- Realizes eating is necessary

<http://hsc.usf.edu/NR/rdonlyres/435CB8AC-84C4-491B-920E-785F4E1A34F0/26063/8TraitsofEmotionalHunger.pdf>

Discussion Questions

- What are my most common traits of emotional hunger?
- What are my “false alarm” signals that I tend to confuse with physical hunger?
- What triggers my emotional hunger cues?