



MIND |

Impulsively hungry

ELENA IACOVU helps us overcome emotional eating.

Our emotions and eating behaviours are intimately connected. When food becomes a coping strategy to numb the way we feel, a pattern of comfort eating emerges. By simply enhancing emotional awareness to recognise our habits, we can break this cycle.

Have you ever sat down to eat a bowl of ice cream after a painful phone call with your mum? Or found yourself at the drive-through after a really awkward date? A simple way to see if you eat to satiate emotions rather than out of hunger is to stop and take a look at what is happening.

"Ask yourself, 'Am I hungry?' If you are not, it is likely you are reaching for food for some other reason," says eating psychology coach Cardelia Vecchio, founder of The Nourish Affect (thenourish affect.com.au).

"Emotional eating is simply what happens when we turn to food to help us feel better. It is the times when, consciously or unconsciously, we

eat to escape an emotion, thought, or feeling we don't want to face. It is a coping mechanism."

Uncovering your personal eating story

Emotions and eating combine from an early age. "Since we were babies, food meant love, security, comfort and satiation," Vecchio says. "Our parents might have rewarded us with food, and then we continued the pattern of associating food with good times."

On the flip side, negative self-talk, emotional dissatisfaction, feelings of loneliness, boredom, anxiety, grief and pain trigger us to reach for food to numb the feelings, Vecchio explains.

Supported by science, a 2012 study by researchers at Case Western Reserve University found that people-pleasers eat more to match the peer's eating, to make the peer feel comfortable, and to maintain social harmony by giving in to social pressure.

For some, food might be the quickest way to feel good after a long, hard day. Research from the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health suggests that women experiencing occupational burnout, due to chronic work stress, are more vulnerable to emotional and uncontrolled eating, affecting their weight and their likelihood of developing obesity.

"These things are the layers of our food story and none of them are bad," Vecchio says.

"By bringing awareness to them, we have the power to acknowledge them, learn from them, and begin creating something new."

The role of the mind

When feeling low or depressed, stress levels rise, releasing cortisol, a stress hormone that affects the desire to eat. If we're feeling depressed, it is possible at that moment, we don't have enough of the 'feel good' hormone, serotonin.

"These physiological changes occurring in the brain trigger our urge to eat out of emotions," says health coach and nutrition expert Courtney Berlin, founder of Fit Girls Eat Burgers. (fitgirlseatburgers.com)

"Simple carbohydrates like cakes, bagels and white pasta give us a rush that causes the brain to send out serotonin. When that is released, we instantly feel better, but for just about everyone it is short lived. There is a high from the food and then a low.

"Once you become aware of this, just stop, and really evaluate why you are reaching for more food. Using the power of your mind will help you truly understand the 'why' of the situation," Berlin says.

Because clarity is king, begins by making sure you are eating the right combination of carbohydrates, protein and fats, to help head off cravings.

Pay attention to the voice in your head, Berlin says. You can talk it up and tell your brain, 'I know what you are doing; this is a physiological feeling from emotions.' Wait it out and if it becomes unbearable, simply grab that food item without beating yourself up about it.

A tool you can use is HALT. Ask yourself: am I really hungry? Am I really angry? Am I lonely? Am I tired? These questions raise awareness of which part of the body is in need of food. Write down what you are feeling, in that moment, before opening the refrigerator. You just might catch yourself and talk yourself out of a tough moment, Berlin says.

Mindfulness, Vecchio says, is the power of being right here, right now in thought and behaviour that affords us the ability to change our actions and create new patterns.

"Be mindful between emotional eating events. It is the in-between times which help build up resilience. During emotional eating events, stop and ask, 'what am I feeling?' 'Is there a message in this?' Be kind during this relearning phase. The journey informs the destination and kindness gives strength to the goal."

Linking emotion to food

When we look at what our go-to comfort food item is, and we link it to the organ that will be affected, then we can establish the underlying emotion we are dealing with and get to the bottom of the issue more quickly.

"Working with the awareness of what is going on is key," says emotional strength trainer Amanda Fay. (amandafay.com.au)

"It is essential to understand that emotional eating has an anatomy, and when you put the pieces of the puzzle together, you rise above the guesswork. There will be patterns, there will be life events, and there will be triggers. By linking the food of choice and understanding the emotion associated to it, we are onto a winning recipe."

LIVER

Function: The liver produces, stores and releases glucose depending on the body's needs.
Food: Sugar
Emotional triggers: Anger



GALL BLADDER

Function: Stores bile, which helps break down and digest fats.
Food: High fat
Emotional trigger: Resentment, bitterness, hard thoughts.



KIDNEYS

Function: The kidney filter blood, which is like your body's natural toxin filter.
Food: High in fat, salt and sugar, alcohol, smoking
Emotional trigger: Fear



HEART

Function: Blood pressure
Food: Salt
Emotional trigger: Unresolved, long-standing emotional problems, hard thoughts (hardening of the arteries), insecurity.



Bowel

Function: Releasing waste
Food: All the above foods, which have not been digested optimally.
Emotion: Fear of letting go of the old and no longer needed.

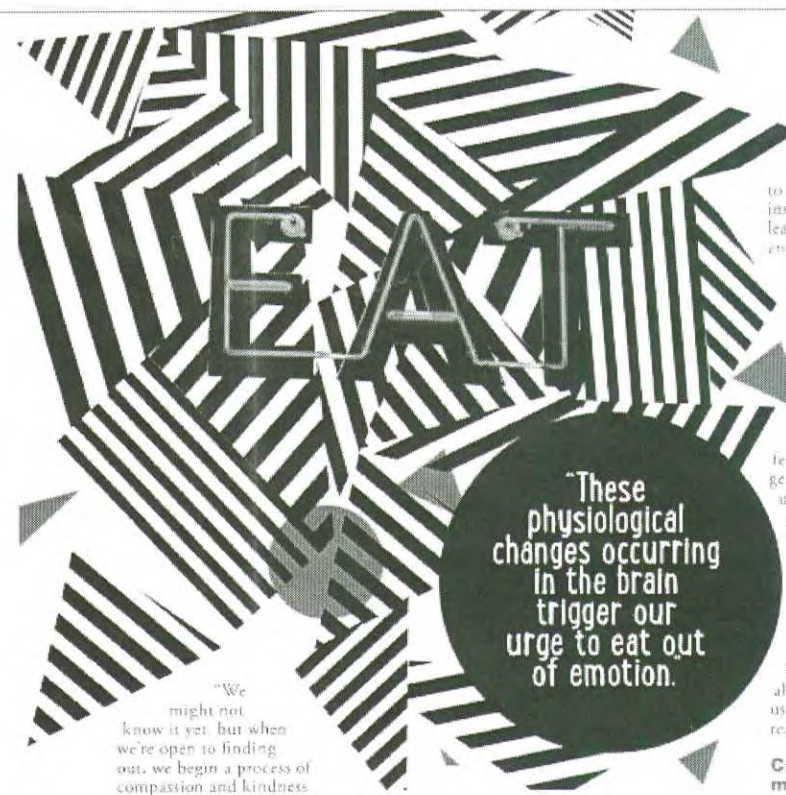
Spirit connection

We eat even when we're not hungry to fill something we often cannot name. We don't know why we're eating or what we're actually looking for. Food is used to distract us from the basic feeling of being uncomfortable within ourselves. So what are we looking for?

"What we are looking for is a sense of being at home, being at peace within ourselves," says Geneen Roth author of *Women Food and God*. (genenroth.com)

"And you cannot feel peace by shaming, depriving, blaming and punishing yourself," she says.

The first thing spirit brings is an understanding that in fact there is a good reason why we are doing what we're doing, Roth says.



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"We might not know it yet but when we're open to finding out, we begin a process of compassion and kindness towards ourselves, and a willingness to understand why we are using food for comfort."

Going within

Turning back to understand ourselves is challenging to do because we live in a culture that emphasizes looking outside ourselves. The attitude also exists that overeating is some kind of

Overeating causes such suffering that if we are willing to use it as the doorway into ourselves instead of as the way to distract and leave ourselves, then it changes the entire situation."

Roth says to find out if you are judging, shaming or punishing yourself. If you are and there is that voice – the inner critic or inner parent – it will keep you from understanding yourself and that is the biggest obstacle for any kind of change.

She also recommends welcoming what you are feeling instead of trying to fix it or get away from it. This will lead you to understand yourself. Be curious and open and find where that emotion is located in your body. Instead of telling a story about it and dredging up the entire past, just find out where it is now.

Reason being, underneath all that, basic peace and joy exist, says Roth.

"When we touch into it, we get very happy, feel very light and feel as if we already know that place. Coming back to us feels so familiar. This is truly who we really are."

Create new coping mechanisms

Instead of reaching for food, incorporate enjoyable strategies into your daily life. Vecchio suggests: walk to stimulate the brain's happiness chemicals; breathe deeply to create a relaxation response; meditate to reduce stress levels; do one thing every day that you think is fun.

Roth suggests: Do what makes you feel most alive. Be yourself, have confidence, and trust who you are. NIH

pathology, or a kind of madness, illness or sickness that needs to be fixed before we can look any deeper.

"Eating when we are not hungry, or not stopping when we have had enough, is itself the doorway to understanding ourselves," Roth says.

"We don't need to be fixed before we start understanding ourselves."



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