

# Managing Emotional Eating

## What is this information leaflet about?

This information is about emotional eating. It explains:

- What emotional eating is and how it differs from 'physical' hunger
- How you may get into a cycle of emotional eating
- How you can recognise your triggers (causes) for emotional eating
- How you can learn to respond differently to your triggers for emotional eating
- Alternative ways that may help you to avoid emotional eating
- Where you can find further advice, resources and support.

## Why have I been given this information?

You have been given this leaflet to help you reflect on why you continue to eat foods you are trying to avoid. This information can help you recognise when you are eating for emotional reasons and how to change this.

## What is emotional eating?

Emotional eating is when you eat in response to the feeling that you have rather than because you need nutrition. Different feelings (emotions) can trigger emotional eating.

This can happen when we experience difficult events, for example, to comfort ourselves when experiencing worry, sadness or anger.

We may also eat in response to positive events, for example, to celebrate a birthday where we are feeling happy, or a change that makes us excited.

We can also eat in response to boredom, to occupy ourselves.

These are just a few of the emotions that can cause emotional eating:

**Nervous**

**Bored**

**Sadness**

**Excited**

**Happiness**

**Anger**

## What drives your emotions?

Have you ever wondered why we may eat in response to certain emotions? The answer can often lie in our underlying beliefs about food and how we treat ourselves.

Underlying emotional beliefs are deep-rooted ideas we hold about ourselves, others and the world. These beliefs are often shaped by past experiences, and they influence how we feel, react and relate.

**These are some examples of underlying emotional beliefs:**

<b>Emotional comfort</b>	<b><i>“Food makes me feel better”</i></b>
<b>Punishment/self-harm</b>	<b><i>“I deserve to feel bad; I should eat until I feel sick”</i></b>
<b>Distraction</b>	<b><i>“Food stops me thinking”</i></b>
<b>Sabotage</b>	<b><i>“I have no control, or willpower, and by eating, I prove this to myself”</i></b>

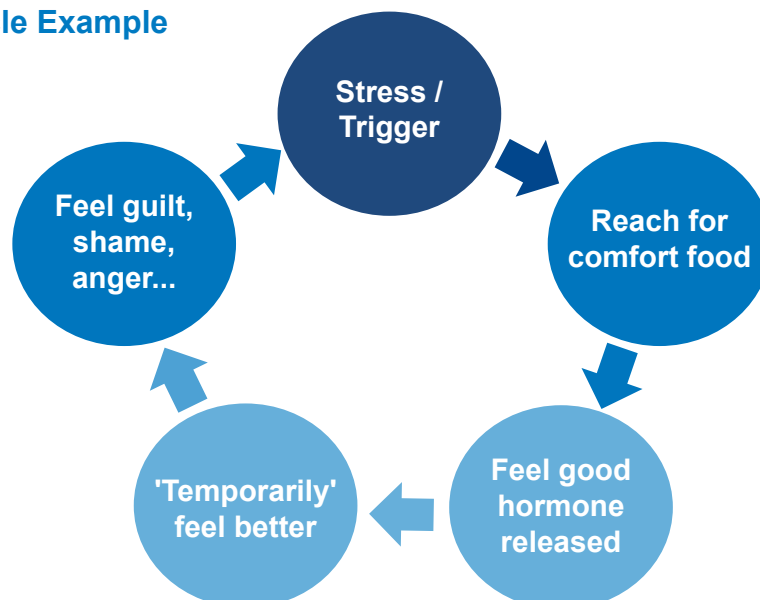
## What is the emotional eating cycle?

It is common for people to use food as a reward or comfort to temporarily make them feel better. If you use food in this way to cope with things often or all the time you can get stuck in a cycle. You will eat food that your body does not need.

**The emotional eating cycle has these steps:**

1. You feel an emotion such as upset, bored, or excited.
2. You turn to food in response to the emotion – this can be a pattern you have followed for many years
3. Eating makes you feel better in the short-term as you gain pleasure from the taste of food, or sensation of fullness.
4. After a while, you feel guilty or ashamed about your emotional eating, particularly if this affects your health or undermines your weight-loss goals.
5. These feelings may trigger further emotional eating.

### Emotional Eating Cycle Example



## How might my emotions become linked to food?

We can learn to link food with emotions with certain contexts. For example, you might connect:

- A Friday night takeaway with helping you to relax after a stressful week
- Birthday cake with making you feel happy
- A hot drink before bed with helping you to sleep

If you repeat these things often, they can become a routine, and you may not even be aware of it.

## What is the difference between emotional and physical hunger?

If you often use food to help you deal with your feelings, it can be difficult to tell the difference between emotional and physical hunger. Learning to tell the difference will help you to avoid emotional eating.

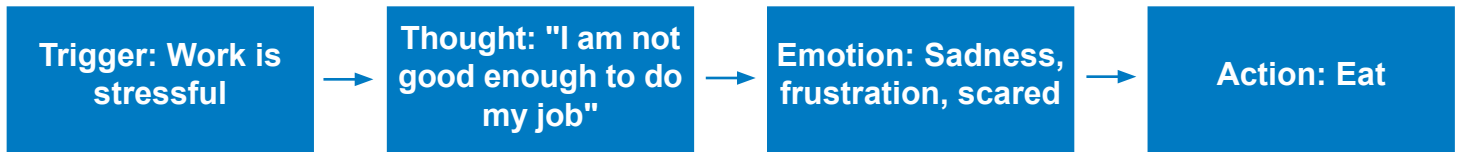
One way to do this is to ask yourself, “Am I really hungry or do I just want to change the way I feel?”

## What clues can help me to tell whether I have emotional or physical hunger?

Emotional hunger	Physical hunger
<p>Sensations of hunger are associated with the onset or intensification of strong emotions, including anxiety, stress, anger, sadness, or joy.</p> <p>May experience physical sensations in the stomach, however these sensations will generally feel more like anxiety.</p> <p>Comes on rapidly and is immediately intense, often in conjunction with an intense emotion.</p> <p>The desire/craving for food is often more specific.</p> <p>The sensations of hunger may feel tied to a desire for soothing, comfort, relaxation or numbing.</p> <p>Occurs independent of the last time you ate.</p> <p>Feels it needs to be satisfied instantly</p> <p>Is not satisfied with a full stomach</p>	<p>Physical sensations in the stomach, including emptiness, growling, grumbling, or gnawing</p> <p>Comes on slowly.</p> <p>The desire for food may be less specific</p> <p>Generally experienced 2-3 hours after eating something satisfying, although may occur soon or immediately after eating if you've eaten something inadequate or are undernourished.</p> <p>Can wait</p> <p>Stops when you are full</p>

## How can I map my triggers to my emotional eating?

The first step to manage emotional eating is to identify your personal triggers and the thoughts and emotions that link them to your eating. Think about what situations or thoughts cause you to reach for food.



The following example shows how you can map a trigger to the thought, emotion and emotional eating that follow it.

Use the space to write down what you think your triggers are and the thoughts and emotions that lead to emotional eating that are linked to them:

## Why are regular meals important to manage my emotional eating?

Eating regularly has been proven to reduce emotional eating. Eating regular meals helps to prevent hunger, which can affect our mood. Skipping meals or eating at odd times makes hunger more likely, so aim to eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner with snacks if needed. Extreme diets can leave us feeling very hungry, which in turn can make us feel tired, miserable, angry, tense or irritable.

Strict diets may also make us think about food all the time and cause cravings. Giving into these cravings may then leave us feeling guilty, out of control or a failure, which may trigger further attempts to restrict what we eat. This cycle of starving and overeating can cause an unhealthy relationship with food, and over time can harm both our physical and mental health or find it harder to concentrate or focus.

## Alternative strategies

### What kinds of things could I try that might change my emotional response to a trigger?

Try to reflect on how you respond to your emotions. Plan how you can respond in a different, more positive way in the future. There are some examples below, you could also add your own examples:

Emotion	What does this emotion tell me?	How do I usually respond?	Is this helpful?	How can I respond in the future?
Boredom	I need to do something	Snack mindlessly – e.g. reach for any snack that is convenient	No, it does not address the boredom I am experiencing. I then feel guilty for not doing anything.	I could take up a new hobby.
Stress	I feel out of control right now	Eat chocolate cake	No, it does not stop the source of my stress, and now I feel guilty	Reach out to a friend or family member

## Building a pause

Before you eat take time to ask yourself, “*Am I hungry I do I want to eat because I want to change how I feel?*” This gives you a chance to be curious and think about the real reason you may feel that way and then decide how you want to act. You may find it scary at first when you stop using food as a comfort to deal with your feelings. You will find that difficult emotions are easier to cope with if you start building in a pause to notice and be more aware of what you need in that moment.

## Urge Surfing

One strategy that might help with this is called 'Urge Surfing'. Urge surfing is a technique for managing one's own unwanted behaviors. Rather than giving in to an urge, a person learns to ride it out, like a surfer riding a wave. After a short time, the urge will pass on its own.

Acknowledge and accepting an urge as a temporary wave without acting can reduce impulsive behaviours.

You can practice 'urge surfing' by:

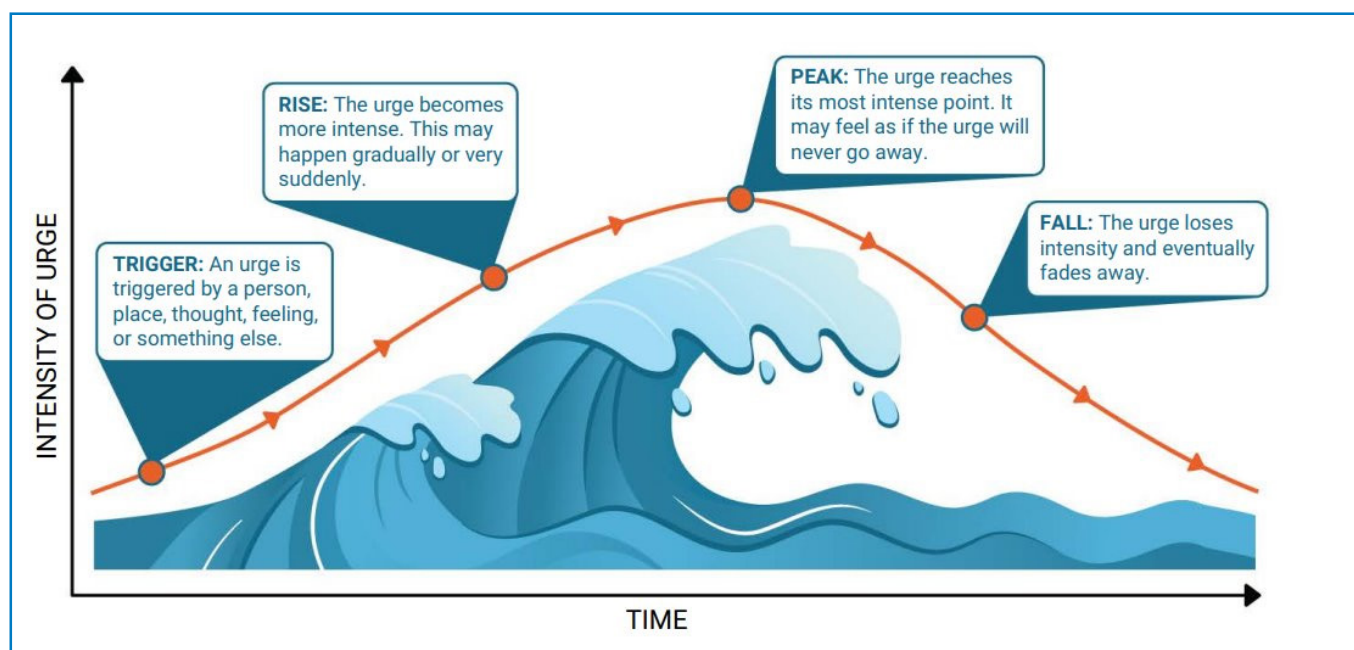
1. Acknowledge you are having an urge.
2. Notice your thoughts and feelings without trying to change or suppress them. Note: It is normal to feel some discomfort during an urge.
3. Remind yourself...

It is okay to have urges. They are natural reactions to habits.

Some discomfort is okay. I don't have to change it.

An urge is a feeling, not a "must." I can have this feeling and choose not to act.

An urge is temporary. Like any other feeling, it will pass on its own.



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## Mindfulness

Use mindfulness to manage emotional eating. Mindfulness is bringing awareness to that moment.

- Pausing and noticing your breath, bodily sensations and emotions can help you bring awareness to what your current experience is.
- What do you notice?
- Is there an underlying need here that could be met in a different way other than eating?  
For example, are you thirsty (could drink water) / stressed (could try a breathing exercise)?

## You may find the following suggestions useful for responding to your emotions differently:

Pay full attention to the moment that you are in without judgement. Accept it for what it is. This helps you to consider your thoughts and how they make you behave. This means you will not react to them without realising it by eating food.

### Try these all the mindfulness exercises:

- Take 10 deep breaths to calm your mind and body
- Put your thoughts on a page in a journal or diary. Many people prefer to write this by hand, but you could use an electronic device. Do what seems easier for you.
- Body scan - this means moving your attention slowly through different parts of your body. Start from the top of your head and move all the way down to the end of your toes
- Meditate. Use a meditation app podcast if you find it easier.
- Mindful colouring or drawing. Pay attention to the colours or the feel of the pencils on the page

## Self-care

It is important to look after yourself and find joy and comfort in things that are not harmful to your health. There are lots of ways in which you can care for yourself that do not involve eating. Make a list of ways that you can care for yourself to give you more options to cope with the trigger.

### These may include things such as:

- Listening to music
- Journalling
- Colouring
- Crafting
- Walking
- Spending time with friends, family or pets
- Playing games

## What self-care ideas do you have?

Use the space below to write down ways in which you can care for yourself that do not involve food or eating.

## Using our senses to self-soothe

If we experience an emotion, such as stress or sadness for example, often our usual coping strategy may be to eat. Finding alternative ways to 'soothe' our emotional state can help to manage those emotions.

We can use our senses, touch, smell, taste, sight, hearing, in different ways to self-soothe. These could include:

**Touch** - Holding something warm (like a cup of tea) can help us feel calm, connected, and comforted. Or the opposite, such as a cold shower, helps some people to feel invigorated.

**Smell** - Having familiar, comforting scents can help us to feel safe and grounded. Examples include candles, perfume, scented oil on a tissue.

**Hearing** - Creating a playlist of different songs, or sounds that self-soothing, these could include sounds of the water, a roaring fire, classical music.

**Taste** - Sipping on herbal teas, trying flavoured water with lemon or cucumber, using spice and herbs in cooking to help bring out different tastes when mindful eating.

**Sight** - Look at calming images (for example trees, the ocean), light a candle and watch the flame flicker.

## Why is a good sleep pattern important to manage my emotional eating?

Those with poor sleep or who sleep less than 6 hours a day are more at risk of emotional eating and weight issues. Poor sleep leads to increased hunger for higher calorie foods and a less conventional meal pattern leading to higher energy intakes overall. Try to prioritise sleep and have consistent sleep and wake times.

## What should I do if I have a setback in managing my emotional eating?

Although planning alternative strategies to manage emotional eating is a proactive and helpful move, it is inevitable that this may not always go to plan. Your mind will want to automatically follow the emotional eating path, so it is normal that you might flip between old and new habits.

It is important to consider how we react to these 'setbacks'.

Often people can become self-critical after an emotional eating setback, this can have a negative impact on your mood. It is normal to have setbacks when you are making changes. If you have a setback, be kind to yourself. Plan what you will do differently next time you are in that situation.

### ***If you step back and think about the way that you speak to yourself after a setback...***

Would you realistically think that you would speak to someone else like that?

Would you use those words and express yourself with that tone of voice?

What would you say?

What tone of voice would you use?

What would your facial expressions show?

Rather than giving yourself a hard time for a setback, it may be more useful to consider what you could learn from this.

For example, if you planned to eat a home-cooked meal but felt stressed due to work and ordered a takeaway, what could you do in response to your stress next time?

**We hope that this leaflet has helped you to understand what emotional eating is, the function of it as well as the underlying beliefs based on our experiences. We also hope that this leaflet has started to provide you with some alternative strategies to manage emotional eating.**

**Recommendations for apps, websites and books to help you manage emotional eating:**

Headspace (app)

Beat: <https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/>

GRO Health: <https://www.grohealth.com/>

Denise Ratcliffe (2008). Living with Bariatric Surgery: Managing your mind and your weight (book).

Denise Ratcliffe. Understanding and managing emotional eating: A psychological skills workbook (book).

Kenneth Goss (2011). The Compassionate Mind Approach to Beating Overeating (Overcoming): Series editor, Paul Gilbert (Compassion Focused Therapy) (book).

## Emotional eating journal

Time/ day	Where were you eating?	Who were you eating with?	What was the trigger/ stressful event? (event, physical feeling,place)	Reaction to the trigger? What did you think? What did you say to yourself?	Emotions experienced?	Emotional eating thoughts? What did you think about food?	What did you eat?	Hunger scale 1-10 1= Not hungry 2= Very hungry	Feelings during eating	Feeling after eating - short term / long term?
Reflections/ How did your emotions affect your eating today?/ Are any patterns emerging?										
Is there anything else you wish you had done instead? / What could you do differently next time?										

**If you have any comments about this leaflet or the service you have received you can contact :**

Specialist Weight Management Service  
Huddersfield Royal Infirmary  
Telephone: 01484 355217

[www.cht.nhs.uk](http://www.cht.nhs.uk)

**If you would like this information in another format or language contact the above.**

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