

Stress and Emotional Eating

Everyday life can bring about stress at any time. Whether it is a deadline at work or just trying to get all your errands run before the morning rush, we all face stress, and how each of us deals with it is a personal choice. Emotional eating is a way many people cope with negative feelings such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, stress, and boredom. We consume unhealthy foods or unhealthy amounts of food to hide negative thoughts and feelings. Knowing what causes us to turn to food in a stressful time is important in preventing emotional eating patterns. It is also important for us to be able to recognize emotional eating and how to deal with it.

What Is Stress?

Stress is a general term for any stimulus, either psychological (affecting the mind) or physiological (affecting the body), that requires a response or adaptation. The human body faces stress daily and even requires a certain amount of stress to thrive. There are both good and bad forms of stress, though too much stress of any kind can be damaging to the body.

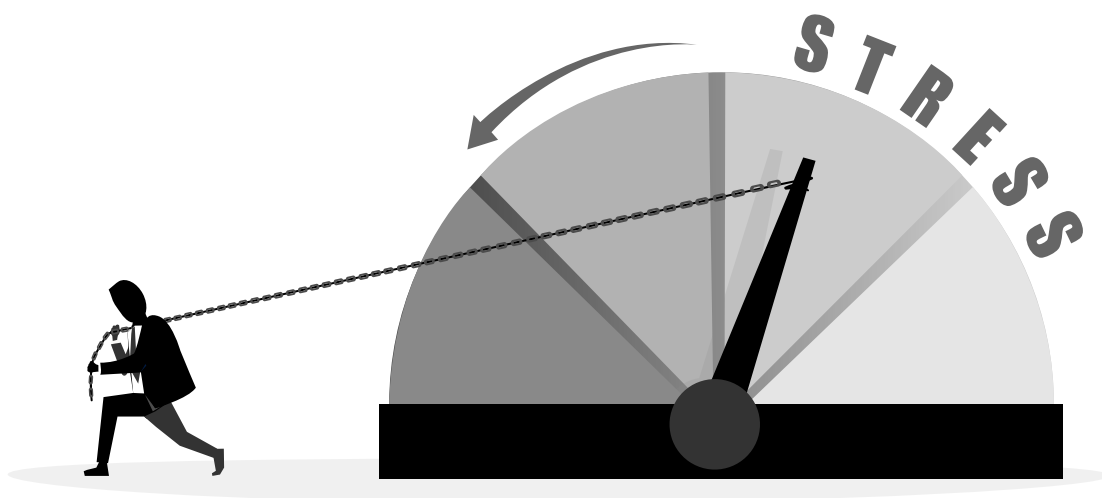
Signs of Stress

Some signs of stress:

- Insomnia or sleeping disturbances
- Headaches
- Gastrointestinal upset
- Weight gain or loss
- Muscle tension and cramping
- Fatigue
- Nervousness or anxiety
- Problems with memory and concentration
- Increased irritability
- Overreactions
- Reproductive problems
- Chest pain

Responses to Stress

People react to stress in their own way. There are both positive and negative ways of dealing with stress. Positive responses include participating in an enjoyable hobby or physical activity or joining a support group. Negative responses include substance abuse, overeating or emotional eating, skipping meals, or not eating at all. Negative responses to stress can be detrimental to your health, both physically and mentally.



Avoiding Emotional Eating

A good way to avoid emotional eating is to reduce the amount and cause of stress in your life. You can reduce stress by using time management, prioritizing events, taking short breaks from work or daily activities, and learning relaxation techniques. Recognizing that stress is present and learning how to cope with it is a way of preventing yourself from turning to emotional eating. Remember, you cannot always avoid stress. If you cannot avoid stress, you have to learn constructive or positive methods of dealing with it.

You can avoid emotional eating by identifying other activities you enjoy. Being involved in a hobby or sport can distract you from constantly thinking of food and consumption. The physical activity from a hobby or sport can also help increase energy expenditure and prevent weight gain. Less physically active hobbies include reading, writing, solving puzzles, scrapbooking, photography, or model building. Interacting with family and friends can keep you entertained and help with low self-esteem issues. Support groups are available to those who are unable to cope and deal with stress on their own.

Dealing with Emotional Eating

We all know life would be easier if we didn't have problems like emotional eating. However, these problems do exist, and we are faced with the dilemma of what to do about emotional eating. We need to first recognize the problem. At one time or another, all of us eat for emotional or social reasons instead of when feeling hungry. Occasional emotional eating is generally not a serious concern, but if it becomes a habit or a common occurrence, it can become a health concern that needs to be addressed.

To recognize the problem of emotional eating, examine the signs of stress and emotional eating mentioned above. If you can identify one or more of these signs, you may have a problem with emotional eating. Another useful method for identifying emotional eating is to keep a food journal for several days. Keep track of what you eat, why you are eating, where you are eating, when you are eating, and how you are feeling when you're eating. If

you are consistently eating for reasons other than hunger and are suffering from signs of emotional eating, you should consult a health professional.

Significant problems with stress, including emotional eating, are best dealt with by health professionals. These are complex problems that can vary greatly from person to person. However, most people have less severe problems with emotional eating and can often overcome this problem without expensive treatment. Here are some ways of resolving less severe problems with emotional eating:

- Substitute other activities for eating when you are not hungry.
- Reduce stress in your life.
- Find a support group or accountability partner.
- Choose healthy snacks and meals while avoiding "junk" foods.

Children and Emotional Eating

When it comes to children and stress, we are often guilty of encouraging emotional eating. Parents and caregivers frequently offer favorite foods to children when they are upset to cheer them up. Using food as a coping mechanism can lead to emotional eating later in life. Talking with your children about their problems and the issues they face can help them choose healthier ways of dealing with stress. Another common occurrence is using food as a reward. If a child does something good, the parent offers a favorite food or treat. This can be harmful, because children begin to associate positive events with overindulgence.

Summary

Many different causes create stress in our lives. Some of this stress is good and healthy. However, much of the stress we deal with can lead to unhealthy habits such as emotional eating. It is important to learn how to recognize signs and sources of stress in your life. It is also important to recognize how you cope with stress. While there are many positive ways to cope with stress, we do not always use them. Learning to avoid emotional eating patterns can greatly improve your health and well-being.

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