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Ditch This Habit to Become a Slim Jim or Skinny Sally

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola ✔ Fact Checked | April 28, 2022

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Physically, emotional eating can lead to obesity and related health problems; psychologically, it may delay or prevent you from addressing your emotions and stress
- Three hormones that play important roles in emotional eating and food addiction are dopamine, cortisol and serotonin
- The stress hormone cortisol not only regulates your fight-flight-or-freeze response, but it also regulates your body's use of carbohydrates, fats and proteins. This is why stress can trigger the compulsion to reach for junk food
- Emotional eating is primarily triggered by stress and boredom. Research shows calorie-dense foods trigger fat accumulation that inhibits your primary stress response system
- Research also shows people reach for comfort foods when they feel isolated, because the food in question reminds them of a strong emotional relationship they once had

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Emotional eating and food addiction are very real problems, and the eating can easily lead to the addiction. While emotional eating is a universal phenomenon and won't do any significant harm in the short term, if you find yourself reaching for comfort foods on a regular basis, it can lead to significant problems, both physical and psychological.

Physically, emotional eating can lead to obesity and related health problems, and psychologically, it may delay or prevent you from addressing your true emotions and sources of stress. As clinical psychologist Susan Albers told HuffPost, "… [E]ating to avoid facing feelings is like putting a 'Band-Aid on a broken arm.'"[1]

The Chemicals Involved in Emotional Eating

Your emotions and food intake both result in a cascade of biochemical reactions, and these chemicals can have a potent effect. As explained in Dr. Pamela Peeke's book, "The Hunger Fix: The Three-Stage Detox and Recovery Plan for Overeating and Food Addiction," the neurotransmitter dopamine is a critical player in all forms of addiction, including food addiction.

The stress hormone cortisol and the neurotransmitter serotonin also play important roles. As reported by HuffPost:[2]

> *"Cortisol is our main stress hormone, triggering our fight-or-flight instinct. It also regulates how our bodies use carbohydrates, fats and proteins. So if we're stressed or anxious and cortisol kicks in, that can make us want to carbo-load.*
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> *'When we're stressed, our bodies are flooded in cortisol,' said … Albers. 'That makes us crave sugary, fatty, salty foods.' Then there's dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with learning about rewards. It kicks into gear at the promise that something positive is about to happen, like eating a food you love.*
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> *The comfort foods we turn to because they taste so good give us a surge of dopamine, Albers said, and we look for that high again and again … And let's not forget serotonin, aka "the happy chemical" … serotonin itself isn't in food — but tryptophan, an amino acid necessary to produce serotonin, is.*
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> *Famously associated with turkey, tryptophan is also found in cheese … Carbs can also boost serotonin levels, which can improve your mood, and chocolate, too, is linked to a serotonin spike."*

Comfort Foods Lower Cortisol Levels in Certain Individuals

According to eating disorders experts interviewed by HuffPost, emotional eating is primarily triggered by stress and boredom. Essentially, the act of eating "gives us something to do. It fills our time, gives us a way to procrastinate," Albers says.

Research[3] published in the journal Psychoneuroendocrinology in 2011 confirms the stress-reducing influence of comfort foods, showing that calorie-dense foods trigger the accumulation of mesenteric fat — a main contributor to abdominal obesity — which inhibits hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical (HPA) axis activity.

The HPA axis is your primary stress response system that links your central nervous system and endocrine system together.[4] According to the researchers, "long-term adaptation to chronic stress in the face of dense calories result in greater visceral fat accumulation (via ingestion of calorie-dense food), which in turn modulates HPA axis response, resulting in lower cortisol levels."

Put another way, eating a lot of comfort food lowers your stress response. Unfortunately, it also leads to unhealthy fat accumulation. If you're like most, you don't reach for apples or carrots when in a funk. Comfort foods by and large tend to be unhealthy, with cake, cookies, ice cream and chips being among the more common.

Food Versus Feelings

Over time, eating becomes associated with emotional relief; it's a way to temporarily distance yourself from emotional discomfort and dampen your experience of stress. Karen R. Koenig, a licensed clinical social worker and expert on eating psychology told HuffPost:[5]

> *"There's conscious and unconscious emotional discomfort. Sometimes we know [what we're feeling], sometimes we don't — we just feel uneasy or not happy, and we don't deal with that. Instead, we just eat.*

> *Then we get what we know we'll have: shame, remorse, regret. We trade in the first discomfort, which is maybe unfamiliar and something we're more frightened of, for the familiar feelings that come after emotional eating."*

Comfort Foods Are Associated With Positive Memories

An interesting study published in 2015[6] found that people reach for comfort foods when they feel isolated in some way, because the food in question reminds them of a strong emotional relationship they once had. Highlights from this study include the findings that:

- *Comfort food is associated with relationships (it has "social utility")*
- *Feeling isolated predicted how much people enjoy comfort food*
- *Threatened belonging led those with secure attachment[7] to enjoy comfort food more*

Here, a group of undergraduate students at the State University of New York at Buffalo were asked to recall a time when a close relationship was under threat, or a moment when they felt alienated and alone. Another group was not given this instruction.

Afterward, the group that was instructed to think back on an emotionally stressful time were found to be more likely to eat comfort foods, and they rated the tastiness of those foods higher than the group that were not eating to dampen their emotions. HuffPost notes:[8]

> *"Think about all the happy and comforting memories you have involving food. Maybe your family used to celebrate occasions with a trip to the ice cream shop, or maybe your mom or dad used to soften the blow of a bad day with macaroni and cheese. When you're feeling rejected or anxious today, eating one of those foods is an instant connection to that soothing time."*

How to Separate Your Emotions From Your Eating

If emotional eating strikes now and then, it probably will not cause you any harm. The real danger lies in chronic emotional eating, which can undermine your health and emotional well-being. So, what can you do? According to the experts interviewed by HuffPost, it's important to separate your emotions from your food intake. HuffPost writes:

> *"To start with, we have to remember food's true purpose — to nourish us. In fact, Koenig suggests that the term 'comfort food' itself could be part of the problem. 'A misleading misnomer if there ever was one, comfort is not something we want to keep associating with food,' Koenig said.*
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> *'We want to file food in our brains under nourishment and occasional pleasure. We want to seek comfort through friends, doing kind things for ourselves and engaging in healthy activities that reduce internal distress. As soon as you start looking for food, stop,' Allen advised.*
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> *'Think, 'Am I hungry? Do I need food in my stomach, or is one of my triggers going off? What do I need right now?" Both Albers and Koenig said that we should ask ourselves if we're actually hungry for food or if we need some other action to treat what we're feeling."*

Journaling is one option. Allen suggests writing down what you eat, why and when, to help you identify emotional eating patterns. Another suggestion offered by Koenig is to think in terms of a yes/no flow chart. Ask yourself questions such as "Am I hungry? What do I want to eat right now? What am I feeling?"

If you find that your search for food is triggered by a negative emotion, find a more constructive way to address it. The concept of mindful eating can also be helpful. When you eat, really focus on the act of eating. As noted in the featured article:[9]

> *"What good is even the most delicious treat if you're so emotionally distracted that you're just eating and eating to the point where you can't even taste it anymore, and you've ignored the signs of fullness to the point of discomfort?*

> *When we eat, the goal is to sit down and really experience that meal and its flavors, and be aware of when we're full … We can enjoy our cookies every now and then, but we should try to eat them for the pleasure of eating a cookie and not as a form of self-therapy."*

Food Addiction — Another Debilitating Problem

Unchecked emotional eating can easily transition into food addiction. Not only is the emotional component driving the behavior, but comfort foods such as cookies and ice cream are also loaded with addictive substances — sugar being one of the main ones. But even in the absence of emotional eating, food addiction can be a problem.

The correlation between food addiction and recreational drug addiction is actually quite striking, and probably stronger than most people suspect. Researchers have found a high degree of overlap exists between brain regions involved in processing rewards, be it sweets or addictive drugs.[10]

Not only can sugar and sweets substitute for drugs like cocaine, in terms of how your brain reacts to them, they can be even more rewarding.[11] The dramatic effects of sugar on your brain may explain why you may have difficultly controlling your consumption of sugary foods when continuously exposed to them.

Neuroendocrinologist Dr. Robert Lustig, professor of pediatrics in the division of endocrinology at University of California, San Francisco, has for years warned of the addictive dangers of sugar, and its impact on your health and weight.[12]

Added sugars hide in 74% of processed foods under more than 60 different names,[13] and this abundance of sugar in the diet is what fuels food cravings and addiction, which in turn can take a significant toll on your health, and in a relatively short amount of time.

One of Lustig's studies[14] demonstrated that reducing added sugars from an average of 27% of daily calories down to about 10% improved biomarkers associated with health in as little as 10 days, even when overall calorie count and percentage of carbohydrates remained the same.

The Science of Food Addiction

Research by addiction psychiatrist Dr. Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), has shed much-needed light on how food addiction develops.

Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and positron emission tomography (PET) scanning, which offer high quality views of the brain, Volkow was able to show that when dopamine links to its receptor, called D2, immediate changes take place in your brain cells, causing you to experience a "hit" of pleasure and reward.

While just about any food can trigger pleasure, only the "hyperpalatables," foods high in refined sugar, salt and fat, tend to lead to addiction when consumed regularly. The reason for this has to do with your body's innate survival instinct.

As explained by Peeke, the primary directive of your mind and body is survival, and it will go through some interesting adaptations when survival is threatened. When you indulge in too much of hyperstimulators, be it cocaine, sugar, alcohol or sex, your brain's reward center notes that you're overstimulated, which the brain perceives as not good for your survival, and so it compensates by decreasing your sense of pleasure and reward.

It does this by downregulating your D2 receptors, basically eliminating some of them. But this survival strategy creates another problem, because now you don't feel anywhere near the pleasure and reward you once had when you began your addiction, no matter whether it's food or drugs.

As a result, you develop tolerance, which means that you want more and more of your fix but never achieve the same "high" you once had. All the while, the addictive cravings grow stronger. Volkow's work also revealed that the changes taking place in the brains of drug addicts are identical to those occurring in people addicted to food.

Regardless of the source of the addiction, you see very little dopamine bonding with its D2 receptors in the brain, as their numbers have been drastically decreased due to continued exposure to the addictive substance/process. Importantly, Volkow also found that addiction affects your frontal cortex, often referred to as "the CEO of the brain."

Your frontal cortex is in charge of impulse control, irritability, impatience, strategic planning and more — all the things that figuratively go out the window during withdrawal and addiction. This is why addicts feel so out of control, and why addiction is so difficult to break.

Early Trauma Primes Your Brain for Future Addiction

Experiencing abuse (e.g., physical, emotional, sexual), neglect or other trauma during the formative years of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood can also significantly affect your frontal cortex, thereby making you more susceptible to addiction.

Peeke cites research by Susan Mason, assistant professor at Harvard University, which showed that women who had the highest levels of abuse during childhood had a 90% increased incidence of food addiction. In her book, Peeke also talks about the role of epigenetics, noting there's a "sweet spot" between the ages of 8 and 13 when your genome is particularly vulnerable to epigenetic influence.

If you're wondering whether you may have an issue with food and addiction, there is now a published and credentialed assessment you can take called the Yale Food Addiction Scale. Peeke provides a short and long version of this test in "The Hunger Fix." She also has a quick and easy online food addiction test on her website.[15]

How to Break Your Sugar Addiction

Fortunately, there are solutions to unhealthy junk food cravings. Two of the most effective strategies I know of are intermittent fasting and a cyclical ketogenic diet focused on real, whole foods. These strategies will effectively help reset your body's metabolism and boost your body's production of healing ketones, and your cravings for sugar will dramatically diminish, if not vanish altogether, once your body starts burning fat instead of sugar as its primary fuel.

Ideally, for best results, you'll want to do intermittent fasting and a cyclical ketogenic diet in combination. Another helpful technique, which addresses the emotional component of food cravings, is the Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT). If you maintain negative thoughts and feelings about yourself while trying to take physical steps to improve your body, you're unlikely to succeed.

Fine-tuning your brain to "positive" mode is absolutely imperative to achieve optimal physical health. While traditional psychological approaches may sometimes work, EFT has shown to be a far better, not to mention inexpensive, solution.

If you feel that your emotions or your own self-image may be your own worst enemy when it comes to altering your relationship with food, I highly recommend you read my **free EFT manual** and consider trying EFT on your own. A version of EFT specifically geared toward combating sugar cravings is called Turbo Tapping.

In the video above, EFT practitioner Julie Schiffman also demonstrates how to use EFT to fight food cravings of all kinds.

Sources and References

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