# How to curb emotional eating

Source: Heart and Stroke Foundation

Picture having a stressful day. This could be stress caused by the pandemic, work, your personal life, etc. You then buy your favourite pastry and sit down to enjoy it. After the first bite, a text message arrives and you start checking your phone. Soon, all that remains of your sweet treat is a paper bag covered in crumbs.

You ate the whole thing, but didn't take the time to enjoy it.

Does this scenario sound familiar? Maybe you replace a sweet treat with something crunchy or salty, but the idea is the same. It's called emotional eating – turning to food for comfort when you feel stressed, angry or sad, even if you're not hungry.

**The emotional-weight connection**

Emotional eating is a coping mechanism that some people use to soothe stress, fear, anger, boredom and loneliness. Sometimes, emotions get so linked to eating habits that you reach for comfort food without realizing it.

If you're an emotional eater, you've likely learned that relief from food doesn't last long. This habit can cause weight gain over time, especially if your go-to foods are high in calories, sugar and fat—and they usually are.

Excess weight can increase your risk of heart disease, stroke and other chronic disease – not to mention adding to the stress you're feeling.

**Mindful eating**

If you're eating for reasons other than hunger, it's time to retrain your habits. Mindful eating is a technique that dietitians use with clients to help curb emotional eating. It involves deliberately paying attention to your food choices, and being aware of what is happening in your body and mind.

Mindfulness teaches you to focus on your emotional and physical responses before, during and after eating, without judging yourself. You experience meals with all of your senses, so you truly see, taste, hear, smell and feel your food. It removes guilt associated with food choices, and lets you focus on what being hungry and full really feel like.

Studies show that mindful eating techniques can you help curb binge eating, stop impulsive food choices, stop rewarding yourself with food, control weight and reduce body mass index.

**Get started**

You can learn to refocus your eating patterns. Consider getting help from a dietitian and/or a psychologist who specializes in mindful eating. Meanwhile here are some tips to get you started:

1. **Write it down.** Start a food and mood journal, to keep track of what and how much you eat, and how you're feeling when you eat. Look for patterns to see the connection between your mood and food cravings.
2. **Break the cycle**. If you identify a negative pattern, take steps to change it. Maybe you can substitute healthier alternatives to replace junk food, or reduce portion sizes. Or, take a walk when a craving hits to distract yourself from temptation.
3. **Ditch the distractions.** When you're eating, turn off all screens and focus on your food – how it tastes, smells and looks. Enjoy every bite and pay attention to your fullness cues.
4. **Rate then bite**. Before you reach for a snack, take a second to rate your hunger on a 1-5 scale. Are you really hungry, or just bored? Start with a glass of water – sometimes thirst masquerades as hunger. After a few minutes, if you're still hungry, enjoy your food.
5. **Go slow**. Set small goals to change your behaviour. For example, start by eating meals at a table, rather than while on the go. Or, put down your fork between bites to take time to savour your food. Changing longstanding habits takes time and commitment.

With some practice, mindful eating can help you find the joy in food and learn to listen to and love your body.