

Overcoming Emotional Eating

In the Bible, we see many examples of eating and feasting in a positive light. When the prodigal son finally returned home to the father, a feast was thrown in celebration. Jesus performed His first miracle – turning water into wine – at a wedding feast. Christ tells us, “I stand at the door and knock”, inviting us to open the door so he can come in and *eat* with us.

God created us to celebrate and enjoy food beyond simply nourishing our bodies. That’s why he gave us taste buds! Yet for some of us, that beautiful gift of taste and the enjoyment it brings has become an enemy as well. We’ve allowed ourselves to seek food first when faced with a wide variety of emotions and circumstances.

We eat when we’re happy. We eat when we’re sad. We eat when we’re stressed and busy. We eat when we’re bored. When food becomes our comfort and consumes our thoughts, or causes us to feel out of control, it has likely become our idol.

Our relationship with food has been developing since the day we were born. Consider this: God created breast milk to be slightly sweet. Our taste buds have been delightfully tickled from the moment of our first meal. Most of us associate food with love and comfort because they have been beautifully intertwined. So, where do we begin to unravel our unhealthy relationship with food and rebuild it into one that promotes health and balance? How do we enjoy God’s delicious gift of taste in a way that brings him glory? As with everything we start at the cross asking the Lord for discernment and understanding about our relationship with food and more importantly our relationship with Him. He wants to tear down all the idols in our life. In addition to the spiritual elements of overcoming emotional eating there are some practical steps we can take as well.

Here are some tips from an article by Katie McCallum titled "A Dietitian's No-Nonsense Guide to Fighting Emotional Eating"

1. Recognize the behavior without self judgement.

The first step to effectively addressing emotional eating is to simply recognize that you're doing it.

"By recognizing that the only reason you're eating right now is because of an uncomfortable emotion you're feeling, you're already one step closer to overcoming it," says Kasey Kilpatrick, dietitian at Houston Methodist. "If you have the emotional capacity, you can make this a bigger step forward by

taking a moment to write down a word or sentence that describes what you're feeling."

This step may sound simple — almost too simple. But, to truly be successful, you need to accept the behavior without passing judgement on yourself. This is where the hard work comes in.

"Judgement isn't serving us here. In fact, it makes things worse," explains Kilpatrick. "Self-judgement is accompanied by shame and guilt, strong emotions that further add on to your load and make it even harder to properly process what you're feeling."

As you take the step to recognize and acknowledge that you're emotionally eating, Kilpatrick recommends reminding yourself: *I am a human going through something very stressful, and I'm dealing with it in a very human way.* Next, it's time for Step 2.

2. Find an emotional solution to your emotional problem

In order to move beyond stress eating or emotional eating, you need to both feel your emotion *and* find a productive solution to resolve it.

"Once you've made it through Step 1, it's time to choose a better coping mechanism than food," says Kilpatrick. "Accepting *and* addressing uncomfortable emotions is hard. If you're feeling overwhelmed and need to save Step 2 for later, that's okay! But, ultimately, the goal is to identify a more productive way to handle what you're feeling."

So, what's the right solution to your emotional problem? Well, that depends on both you as a person as well as the particular emotion you're struggling with.

Here are Kilpatrick's recommendations for coping with common emotions:

- Stress – breathing exercises, meditating or finding a quiet place to take a walk
- Loneliness – text, call or video chat with a friend or loved one
- Sadness – make a list of things you're grateful for or laugh along with some comedy
- Boredom – finish a project, watch a movie or read a book
- Anxiety – confide in a friend, spend time with your pet(s) or consider reaching out to a counselor or therapist

"Replacing food with one of the more productive solutions above is really the only way to overcome emotional eating long-term," says Kilpatrick. "And, one last thing — while saying these two steps is easy, following through with them

is hard work that may take time. If it feels like you're taking one step forward one day but then two steps back the next, that's okay! Be patient and lenient with yourself. Changing your mindset towards addressing emotional eating is a process, but it's worth it." Our God is full of mercy and grace for His children. He does not want us weighed down with shame and guilt. He wants us to look to Him and the experts He has granted wisdom to that can help us.

It will take time to change the habit of running to food for the wrong reasons. God wants us to run to him instead. Try to see each temptation as an opportunity to seek the Lord and his comfort and strength. Give yourself grace for the journey and focus on **progress rather than perfection.**

Donna Sicilian