Your Emotions and Food

A lot of focus is placed on what a person eats and how they eat it (Do they eat a lot at one time or maybe only a little?). Still, it’s just as important to understand why we eat certain foods and why we choose certain eating behaviors because this can directly affect our self-esteem and emotional behavior. It can also affect how we perform on tests and homework and even how we interact with our peers.

As a psychotherapist, I work with many people who struggle with concerns related to food. One commonality amongst these individuals is that they use food to deal with their emotions, such as:

- Stress
- Anger
- Sadness
- Boredom
- And even happiness

And let’s be real! Life can be stressful and overwhelming... school, tests, homework, work, friends and even family! As teenagers, you go through many life changes where you may feel alone; where no one really understands you. At times like these, it is very common to turn to food for comfort. Food is all around us, so it’s one of the easiest things to turn to when we are feeling these emotions.

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Turning to Food for Comfort

The foods many of us turn to are full of sugar, which signal feel-good receptors in our brain. What does this do? It makes us feel good, and in turn, makes us want to keep eating. Unfortunately, our brain is tricking us into engaging in unhealthy eating habits. The good news is there are other healthy choices that can also stimulate those feel-good receptors in our brains. When we use those healthier choices, we will be able to find a healthy relationship with food.
food, using it to strengthen our body instead of harming it. Developing these healthy habits early-on will last a lifetime and will naturally become a part of your lifestyle.

Is it OK to eat sugary foods every once in a while? Of course! It’s important to treat yourself! The difference now will be that you can actually enjoy it for what it is instead of using it to deal with your emotions. Now maybe you will be able to see if you are eating a whole bag of potato chips because you are bored or eating a piece of chocolate because you appreciate the taste...because it’s delicious!

**KEEP A FOOD JOURNAL**

Are you using food to deal with your emotions? A great way to figure this out is to start a food and emotion journal to monitor what and why you are eating. It will help you start to notice the connection between the two. This will also help you learn to eat when you are physically hungry rather than eating when you are emotionally hungry. Also, start to notice the foods you are eating when you are bored, tired, stressed, etc. Try to write down everything you eat and drink. It may look something like this (for “Hunger Level,” use the number “1” for when you’re least hungry and use “10” for when you’re very hungry):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT I’M EATING</th>
<th>DAY/TIME</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>SITUATION/MOOD</th>
<th>HUNGER LEVEL (SCALE OF 1-10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>POPCORN</td>
<td>MONDAY, 5PM</td>
<td>HOME</td>
<td>WATCHING TV, BORED</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHICKEN, VEGGIES, CORN BREAD</td>
<td>MONDAY, 7PM</td>
<td>HOME</td>
<td>DINNER, CONTENT</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNICKERS BAR, SODA</td>
<td>MONDAY, 10PM</td>
<td>CONVENIENCE STORE</td>
<td>LEFT THE HOUSE BECAUSE I WAS MAD AT MY MOM</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My food and emotion journal clearly shows that I like sweet and salty foods when I am going through different emotions. Does this mean that popcorn, snickers and soda are bad? Absolutely not! But the reasons I am eating these foods are not for healthy reasons. I am not eating them to indulge and enjoy or because I am hungry; I am eating them because I am emotionally hungry, specifically bored and angry. Now that I know I am sometimes using food to deal with my emotions, what can I do about it? Write down activities you enjoy doing; things that make you happy. These can be used as your healthy coping strategies. Here are some examples:

**HEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES**

- Physical Activity – bike, tennis, swimming, skateboarding, trampoline, football, basketball, dancing, etc.
- Singing
- Drawing and/or painting
- Other arts and crafts (You can find some cool ideas on Pinterest!)
- Reading
- Board games
- Yoga
- Sidewalk chalk
- Play outside
- Taking a walk with your parents
- Play with your pet
- Enjoy nature...
- Play in the rain
- Use your imagination
- Talk it out
- Getting support from a parent, a friend, a counselor, a teacher

**FAMILY FOCUS**

Did having that snickers bar and soda help me deal with my situation with my mom? Not likely. It actually just made me more upset and made me crave more sweets because my mom and I were still in an argument. Now that I am thinking about it, maybe it would have been better to cool off by taking a walk and listening to my favorite music. Once I cool off, I should probably have a conversation with my mom instead of just holding it in and never dealing with it because that will come back to affect me later!

Your family is the primary role model when it comes to eating habits, levels of physical activity and healthy communication. Researchers agree that long-term and short-term success rates are much higher when families are involved in programs designed to help children work on their eating habits and activity levels.
IDEAS TO GIVE YOUR PARENTS

- Make dinner together
- Plan to eat dinner at the table together with no television
- Plant a garden of fresh fruits and vegetables
- “Practice what you preach” – If you want me to make healthier choices, show me how!
- Education on healthy choices
- Let’s talk!

CONCLUSION

Overall, health and wellness encourages healthy attitudes and helps improve academic, social and emotional performance, which also helps you improve how you feel about yourself. This really is about the whole person and not just about what you are eating. It’s so important to identify your eating habits so you can change your lifestyle to be able to live a happier and more balanced life.

Parents and children: Give each other the tools to understand what healthy choices are and how to appropriately deal with your emotions. It may take time and hard work to make this change, but the result will make it all worth it. If you need extra support, connect with a psychotherapist and/or a dietitian. Many school counselors or PE coaches can also help you find resources!

About the Author:
Mari Broome, MSW, LCSW, is a psychotherapist providing counseling to children, adolescents and adults. She specializes in the areas of body image, eating disorders/obesity, and overall health and wellness. She graduated from the University of Florida with a degree in Exercise and Sports Sciences: Fitness/Wellness prior to obtaining her license so that she could provide a more holistic approach to treatment. She is also an Integrative Yoga Therapy Teacher and Children’s Yoga Teacher and incorporates these practices within her practice.
The OAC is the **ONLY** non-profit organization whose sole focus is helping those affected by obesity. The OAC is a great place to turn if you are looking for a way to get involved and give back to the cause of obesity.

There are a variety of ways that you can make a difference, but the first-step is to become an OAC Member. The great thing about OAC membership is that you can be as involved as you would like. Simply being a member contributes to the cause of obesity.

### Why YOU Should Become an OAC Member

Quite simply, because the voice of those affected needs to be built! The OAC not only provides valuable public education on obesity, but we also conduct a variety of advocacy efforts. With advocacy, our voice must be strong. And, membership is what gives the OAC its strong voice.

### Membership Application

#### OAC Membership Categories

- Individual Membership: $20/year
- Institutional Membership: $500/year
- Chairman’s Council Membership: $1,000+/year

#### OAC Membership Add-ons

**(optional, but only accessible by OAC members)**

**Add-on 1: Educational Resources**

To order bulk copies of OAC resources, members can purchase educational packages. If you’d like to order resources, select one of the below packages.

- **Standard Package**
  - 10-50 pieces/quarter
  - $50/year
- **Deluxe Package**
  - 51-100 pieces/quarter
  - $100/year
- **Premium Package**
  - 101-250 pieces/quarter
  - $150/year

**Add-on 2: Make a General Donation**

Make a tax-deductible donation to the OAC when joining as a member. Your donation helps the OAC’s educational and advocacy efforts.

- $5
- $10
- $25
- $50
- $100
- Other

#### Membership/Add-on Totals:

Membership Category: $___

Add-on 1 (if applicable): +$___

Add-on 2 (if applicable): +$___

**TOTAL MEMBERSHIP PAYMENT:** $___

#### Contact Information

Name: _______________________________

Address: _______________________________

City: __________________ State: ___ Zip: _____________

Phone: _______________ Email: ___________________

#### Payment Information

- Check (payable to the OAC) for $_____.
- Credit card for my TOTAL membership fee of $_____.
  - Discover®
  - Visa®
  - MasterCard®
  - Amex®

Credit Card Number: ___________________________

Expiration Date: ___________ Billing Zip Code: ___________

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**Benefits to Individual Membership**

- Official welcome letter and membership card
- Annual subscription to the OAC’s publication, *Your Weight Matters Magazine*
- Subscriptions to the OAC Members Make a Difference and Obesity Action Alert monthly e-newsletters
- “Bias Buster” Alerts, alerting specifically to issues of weight bias
- Immediate Advocacy Alerts on urgent advocacy issues and access to the OAC’s expert advocacy team
- Ability to lend your voice to the cause