



# In the **Mood for Food**

Feeding your feelings can put  
your health at risk. *by Beth Adamo*

**A**nthony considers himself an emotional eater. “Mostly I eat out of boredom and loneliness, when I need to make myself feel better,” he says.

Lori Ann admits that she used to sneak food. “I’d stop at a deli or pizza place after work and eat in the car on the way home—and then eat a whole dinner with my husband. I was always careful to throw away ‘the evidence’ before going in the house.”

Julie can polish off a box of Oreo® cookies without even realizing it. “It’s totally mindless eating, but it’s my reward at the end of a long day.”

Sound familiar?

It’s called emotional eating—and it’s the practice of eating in response to feelings instead of hunger. While emotional eating is not as commonly recognized as other psychological conditions like anorexia or bulimia, it can be addictive and destructive to the body over time.

### **A matter of degree**

Almost everyone has probably eaten in response to an emotion at one time or another. What differs from one person to the next is the degree to which their emotions guide their eating choices. “There’s a fine line on the food addiction spectrum where a person’s emotional eating habits can start to become a problem,” says Beth Rocchio, M.D., a specialist in bariatric medicine (the treatment of obesity). “Somebody takes their first step on that spectrum when they take one mindless or emotional bite. For many people this isn’t necessarily a problem, but if they engage in this behavior over and over, it can form a habit and even rewire the way the brain functions,” she says.

A recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows that approximately one-third of adults in the United States—over 72 million people—are clinically obese. While obesity has reached epidemic proportions, Dr. Rocchio points out that not everyone who is obese is necessarily

an emotional eater. And likewise, not everyone who is an emotional eater is overweight or obese. “Some people can eat emotionally and not know that they have a problem,” she says. One size does not fit all.

### **A hard habit to break**

From birth, food is the first substance that’s readily available that a person can find comfort in. It is, as one compulsive eater says, “the friend that never fails.” Emotional eating can be challenging to overcome in part because you can’t just stop eating, so you can’t go cold turkey like you can with cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs. “For some people, it’s not a lack of discipline or willpower,” says Dr. Rocchio. “For them, it’s a much deeper problem.”

Emotional eating can also be triggered by what’s around us. Grocery stores are packed with thousands of different snack foods alone. And, when

says. Now she’s much more careful about what she eats. “I read the labels on food packages, and when I have a craving, I try to satisfy it with something healthy like an apple or some celery.”

While people can learn to make healthier eating choices, Dr. Rocchio cautions, “If it’s still emotional eating, then the real problem isn’t solved.”

Here are some strategies for coping with emotional eating:

- **Keep a food journal.** Be sure to write down not only what you eat and when, but also where, how, and most importantly, why. Being able to identify what triggers your emotional eating is the first step to overcoming the problem.
- **Find alternatives.** When you’re having a craving in response to an emotional trigger, do something else you enjoy until the urge passes: Go for a walk, call a friend, work in the yard,

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you look at restaurant and food advertising, it’s no wonder so many people associate food with emotions:

- “It tastes the way it feels to fall in love.”
- “As good as a hug from Mom.”
- “Ignoring your craving won’t make it go away.”

“These ads clearly exploit the emotional value of food—and the ad about ignoring your craving is very misleading,” says Dr. Rocchio. “Because, for some people, just the opposite is true. Acting on the craving is what triggers their overeating. For them, it’s actually easier to avoid certain foods than to have ‘just one.’”

### **Ways to cope**

Last year, Lori Ann got a wake-up call when a routine physical showed her triglyceride level to be 385 (a normal level is 150 or lower). “It really scared me,” she

play a game, read a book, listen to music, take a relaxing bath, etc. “Overcoming a craving is like riding a wave. When a person succeeds in riding the wave, they get a little stronger each time,” says Dr. Rocchio.

- **Get help.** If these distractions aren’t enough to manage the distress that leads to emotional eating, talk to your doctor or behavioral health practitioner. He or she can help you find ways to effectively cope with emotional stress, such as relaxation exercises, meditation, or individual or group counseling. Overeaters Anonymous also provides a variety of helpful resources, including local meetings. For more information, visit [oa.org](http://oa.org). ■