

The battle against emotional eating: *arm yourself with the tools you need to win the fight*

by Pam Tremble



photograph by Ally Aubry

Today was just a bad day. You woke up late, the kids were cranky, and your boss didn't like the project you spent the last week working on. You got home and after hustling to get homework done, dinner on the table, and everyone put to bed, you had an argument with your spouse. At the end of a day like this it sure would be nice to find some mental peace in a quiet space and a bowl of your favorite ice cream.

Emotional eating - it's a battle we'll fight every day for the rest of our lives. We can't make it go away; instead we have to learn how to manage it. Losing weight doesn't fix it, getting healthy or exercising a lot doesn't eliminate the behavior, it's a habit we must confront on an intellectual level.

Here are some strategies to help you cope with emotions without turning to food.

Know that it's okay to have emotions.

Emotions are a perfectly natural part of who we are as humans. But that doesn't mean we like feeling sad or stressed or overextended. But when we experience an unpleasant emotion, we don't need to bury it or try to get rid of it, which is what we do when we respond to negative emotions by eating.

Instead try this: Sit quietly for a moment and acknowledge your emotions. If you're angry, then be angry. If you're sad, then be sad. If you're happy, just be happy. You don't need food to acknowledge those emotions, you need to recognize the

feeling, accept it and move on with your day.

Say out loud: "I'm not hungry, I'm emotional."

Thinking it to yourself doesn't work, you have to say it out loud, hear it spoken and acknowledge that the action you're about to take is emotional-based and not hunger-based.

Know your emotional triggers

But beyond that know which triggers get out of control the fastest. Perhaps you are a stress eater but you are fine when you are angry. Or vice versa. Do you treat the family to ice cream sundaes when something good happens and you want to celebrate?

Think about times when you've turned to food in an emotional

situation. What were you feeling? Think about your list and write it down.

Take the time to explore the reasons behind why certain emotions make you eat but others don't. This is a process, so don't rush it. Work in small chunks and keep coming back to this list to continue exploring your emotions on paper. Thinking about it is fine, but writing it down makes those thoughts real so it's important to literally use pen and paper in this exercise.

Make a list of your trigger foods

What foods do you turn to when you are experiencing strong emotions? (i.e.: sweets, salty snacks, alcohol, healthy foods in unhealthy amounts) You might think you already know the answers, but the reality might surprise you. Turn back that list of the times you experienced emotional eating. What did you eat?

Write these foods down and have a physical list. Doing this can help you recognize it when you're emotionally eating. But remember that not every emotion has the same trigger foods. Perhaps when you're under stress you reach for sweet treats but when you're angry you go for alcohol or salty snacks. By exploring the details of each individual emotion, you will have a clearer picture of which battles you must fight when the emotion creeps up.

Make the call.

As you work through the list of emotions and learn to identify your triggers, you'll learn how to recognize the warning signs of emotional eating before it gets out of control.

Being able to identify the emotion is essential. For example, if long hours at work and no scheduled down time

make you feel resentful toward your job and others in your life, make a plan that gives you the time you need to de-stress. By having a strategy you are actively acknowledging your emotions.

Keep an emotional journal.

Writing down your daily feelings will help you learn how to "make the call" and begin to recognize the steps leading up to certain emotions. This journal doesn't need to be complicated, simply spend 5 minutes a day writing down how you felt at different times throughout the day. Did you let food sooth your emotions? Did you allow food to be a companion or a celebrant in your life? Record that. Over time you'll be able to identify any patterns that might need adjusting.

Stock your toolbox.

Now that you have identified the problem, it's time to explore the solution. You need a toolbox that is well stocked and at the ready when you need it. If you need to drive a nail, a toolbox filled with screwdrivers won't do you any good. In your Emotional Eating Toolbox you'll have lists of techniques to employ and activities to do instead of eating.

Find something else to do.

If you eat when you're bored, find a hobby that occupies your hands (knitting, scrapbooking, gardening). If you eat when you're happy, figure out how to release that joyous energy in a positive way (turn the radio up loud and dance around the house with the kids). If you eat when you're angry, find a way to get the aggression out (kickboxing, weight lifting, scrubbing toilets). Make a list of ideas - this list is part of your toolbox.

By creating this list of ideas, when you're in the midst of an emotional rant you don't have to be responsible for thinking clearly to find something to release the emotions, just refer to the list in your toolbox and pick something.

Phone a Friend.

When you're faced with emotion and find yourself standing in front of an open refrigerator, you know you're weak. Lean on someone you trust and who will listen. Pick up the phone, send an e-mail, get on Facebook or join a chat room.



Many emotions - both positive and negative - contribute to emotional eating. Do any of these emotions drive you to food?"

Start writing a list of all the friends and family members you can count on in this situation - include their phone number, e-mail address or screen name. This list is part of your toolbox, as well. As you build your circle of friends, you will find others who struggle with the same things you do. Today you'll be the one doing the leaning - but next week, you might be the one to give support to someone else.

**As GI Joe says:
Knowing is half the battle.**

As you work through this process there will be times when you know you're eating for emotional reasons rather than hunger. And we all know that many times emotions are much more powerful than our logical brain - quite frankly, sometimes emotions get the upper hand.

But knowing or recognizing that you're in the midst of an emotional eating binge is an important step. Remember back when you wouldn't think twice about eating for whatever reason you felt like eating? Working toward awareness is a huge step in the right direction.. Over time, you'll grow stronger and better able to handle your emotions in a healthier way.

Mistakes happen.

No matter how hard we try, emotional eating is going to happen. When it does, don't let guilt plague you and make it even worse. We're not allowed to indulge in guilt-eating to make up for the emotional-eating! Instead, acknowledge that you made a mistake, forgive yourself and move on.

The Emotional Eating Toolbox will contain the tools you create to help you battle emotional eating.

Don't dwell on it. Just make the very next step, the very next meal or snack... the right choice.

What not to do.

So often I hear people give advice to just replace the "bad food" with a healthier choice. So instead of having a slab of chocolate cake when you're feeling sad, have a salad instead. The problem with this is that it doesn't really

address the emotions that drove you to eat in the first place. You're still burying your sadness in food, just that it's a salad instead of cake. And eventually you'll turn back to the cake because, let's face it, salad is not very comforting in times of sorrow.

It's important to address the emotions involved and how we manage our emotions - once we are able to live with the emotion and stop trying to bury it or hide it or sooth it, our behaviors will reflect this healthier mental state. ❀

Pam Tremble has lost 115 pounds since 2007. She has chronicled her weight loss adventures (and misadventures) on her blog: Journey to a Healthier Me at www.PamTremble.blogspot.com.

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Emotional Eating Toolbox

❀ **Emotions are OK**

Sit quietly for a moment and acknowledge your emotions.

❀ **Say it Out Loud**

I'm not hungry. I'm emotional.

❀ **Emotional Triggers**

Explore reasons behind why certain emotions make you eat.

❀ **Eating Triggers**

What foods do you turn to? Make a list for each emotion.

❀ **Make the Call**

Recognize the warning signs before it gets out of control.

❀ **Emotional Journal**

Spend 5 minutes a day writing down how you felt today.

❀ **Activity List**

Create a list of activities to do instead of eating.

❀ **Phone-a-Friend List**

Lean on someone you trust and who will listen.

❀ **Awareness**

Know when you're eating out of emotions rather than hunger.

❀ **Mistake Strategy**

Acknowledge when you make a mistake, forgive yourself and move on.

Emotional Toolkit Worksheet

List your specific emotions that trigger emotional eating.

List the foods you turn to for each different emotion.

What are your warning signs of emotional eating?

List alternate activities for each emotional trigger.

List friends and family you can lean on.

What is your mistake strategy?

Personal goals and notes