**Self Healing**

**Expressing & Nurturing Emotions Without Abusing Food or Your Body**

A lot of our emotions often get tangled up in food, weight, and body issues. As a result, many of us eat even though we are not physically hungry; many of us do not stop eating even though we are physically satisfied; and others of us don’t eat even though we physically need to consume food.

**What is true physical hunger?**

**What does it feel like?**

Hunger is an internal, physiological drive to find and eat food. It usually occurs 3-6 hours after eating a meal (or substantial snack) when our blood sugar levels begin to drop. Hunger usually results in an empty, grumbling feeling in our stomach. We may feel weak, shaky, dizzy, irritable or even get a headache.

When we were babies, we all had a very good sense of physical hunger. We instinctively cried and searched for our mother’s breast or bottle when we were hungry. Just the same, weinstinctively stopped sucking and turned away from our mother’s breast or bottle when our physical needs were met.

**Do we only eat out of physical hunger? And do we always stop eating when our physical needs are met?**

Absolutely not! Now our appetites are affected by a variety of external stimuli that have nothing to do with our internal physical needs. What are some external cues that trigger you to start eating or to overeat?

- **Emotions:** Anxiety or stress, loneliness, sadness, happiness, boredom, fatigue or sleepiness—all of these emotions may trigger eating (or overeating).
- **Rewards:** “I deserve to eat this, I’ve had a hard day.” “Our team/class won, so we get to celebrate with all-you-can-eat pizza!”
- **Social situations:** Parties, holidays, eating out, being with friends, family, or co-workers—we may associate food and eating with each of these social situations.
- **Habit:** “I always eat while watching TV.” “I have to clean my plate, my parents always told me to.”
- **Senses:** The delicious aroma of fresh-baked cookies may trigger you to drop into a bakery for a sample, even if you’ve just had lunch.
- **Deprivation/Diets:** Whether intentional or not, going without adequate food (or favorite foods) for long periods of time often trigger overeating beyond physical requirements once they are made available.
Eating in response to these external cues is mostly a learned response (i.e. we aren’t instinctively driven to eat for these reasons). And, it's totally normal to sometimes eat (and even overeat) for these reasons. But, too much eating in response to these external stimuli can result in weight problems and unhealthy disordered behaviors.

**Do we sometimes NOT eat even though we are physically hungry?**

Absolutely! Now we sometimes suppress our hunger and/or choose to ignore it. What are some reasons why you don’t eat even though you physically need food?

- **Diets:** “I can’t eat that. It’s not allowed on my diet!”
- **Guilt:** “I overate last night, so I’m not going to eat anything today to make up for it.”
- **Emotions (often disguised as “fat feelings”)**
  - Feeling out of control or overwhelmed: “At least I can keep my weight in control.”
  - Feeling unhappy: “If only I were thin, my life would be so much better. If I stick to my diet, I’ll be happier.”
- **Time constraints:** “I’m too busy to stop for lunch.”

Food is one of our most basic human needs. Denying ourselves from eating is similar to denying ourselves from going to the bathroom. When you have to go, you REALLY have to go. Otherwise, you’ll start obsessing about how badly you need to go, you won’t be able to concentrate on anything else, and eventually, you will have an accident (i.e. you’ll wet your pants). The same is true with eating. If you don’t eat when you’re body tells you to, you’ll start obsessing about food, you won’t be able to concentrate on anything else, and eventually, you will have an accident (in this case, you’ll overeat!). It’s totally normal to sometimes NOT eat once in a while because you’re on the go, and food is not readily available. But, ongoing restriction of food intake can result in weight problems and unhealthy disordered behaviors.
Fueling Your Body: The Non Dieting Approach

Disconnected eating occurs when eating behavior is mostly controlled by external factors (i.e. emotions, social situations, habits, or diets as you’ve been reading about) rather than the internal physiological responses to hunger. Once you discover physically-connected eating again (eating in response to hunger and fullness cues), you will feel better and achieve (or maintain) whatever weight is healthy for YOU.

Some tips:

- Dump dieting forever. Diets don’t work. They increase your loss of lean body mass vs. fat, they slow down your metabolism, and they make weight re-gain more likely. Also, most are nutritionally inadequate and overly restrictive, which can lead to fatigue, food cravings, binge eating, depression, and weight re-gain.

- Focus on health and fitness, not weight. The number on the scale says nothing about your body composition or your health and fitness status. Look for improvements in your energy, strength, endurance, flexibility, resting heart rate, blood pressure, or blood cholesterol levels as true measures of success.

- Relate to food as nourishing fuel. It’s not a comforting friend or a fattening enemy. It’s fuel! If you don’t provide your body with adequate, high quality fuel (from carbohydrate, protein, and fat), it will not perform well.

- Listen to your body carefully. Make a distinction between physiological and emotional hunger. Eat when you are physiologically hungry, and stop when you are physiologically full. It’s normal to sometimes eat because it’s there, because it tastes good, or because it will make you feel good. And, it’s normal to sometimes not eat because of time constraints. But most of the time, listen to your body.

- Legalize all foods and end deprivation. There is no such thing as “good” or “bad” foods, only good or bad diets. Realize that once you meet your basic core nutrient needs, its fine to have some tasty “empty calories” (i.e. calorically dense foods that have very few nutrients, but lost of good taste and flavor). When food is off-limits, you want it more and that can lead to binge eating. Moderation is key!

- Discover the right fuel mix for you. Protein and fat promote satiety (or fullness). If you are consuming too little of these, you might experience rampant sugar/carbohydrate cravings.
throughout the day. A handful of nuts, a slice of cheese, or some real oil and vinegar salad dressing may be just what you need to keep your appetite and mood in check.

- **Realize that what you eat at one meal or on one day does not make or break your eating plan.** It costs 3500 extra calories to gain one pound. It’s normal to overeat once in a while. Put it behind you, and move forward without fear that you are going to get fat. It takes days, weeks, and months of overeating to gain weight, not just one day.

- **Eat slowly, at a table, in full awareness.** It takes 10-20 minutes for your brain to get the message from your stomach that you are full. If you gulp down your food or eat on the run, your brain will not feel satisfied and you are likely to overeat.

- **Plan ahead.** Take time to plan nourishing meals and snacks. Keep in mind that your body needs to re-fuel every 3-5 hours. If you let your body get overly hungry, you are more likely to overeat and/or make poor choices when food is finally available. Healthy eating doesn’t just happen when you are in college; you have to make it happen.