Disordered Eating: Positive Steps Towards Change

1. Separate true physiological hunger from emotional hunger. Before you put anything in your mouth, say to yourself, “H.A.L.T.” Then ask yourself, “Why is my desire to eat so high right now?

Am I physically Hungry?
If not, what’s going on?

Are I....

Anxious or stressed?
Lonely or depressed?
Tired or bored?

Eating is not going to make the underlying feeling go away. It’s just a temporary way to numb yourself and give yourself a false sense of comfort and peace. Take advantage of the caring and confidential counseling services on campus to help you discover the underlying feelings that trigger you to overeat. With help, you can work through these feelings in a healthy way.

2. Learn positive ways of expressing and nurturing your emotional needs without food. If you’re feeling tired, take a nap. If you’re feeling lonely, call a friend. If you’re feeling anxious, go for a walk, meditate, or take a relaxing bubble bath. Create a list of at least 3 things you can do instead of eating when you’re non-hunger eating cue strikes. It’s not easy to break old patterns, but in time it will get easier.

3. Plan for success. Remember, restrictive dieting and inadequate calories, protein, or fat intake during the day are likely to trigger a binge later. Learn the basics of good nutrition so that you can fuel your body with the right amount of energy and nutrients for success. After months (or years) of dieting and/or binge eating, you may not know what normal eating looks and feels like.

4. Honor your cravings, and remember there are no forbidden foods! Low calorie munchies (like baby carrots, rice cakes, and air popped popcorn) are great snacks. BUT, if you’re really craving chocolate, then baby carrots most likely won’t cut it! In fact, you’ll probably wind up eating the entire bag of baby carrots plus some rice cakes and then some popcorn and STILL find yourself consuming Hershey Kisses after all that. You’ll save yourself a lot of time, anguish, and calories, if you just identify what you really want when the craving strikes; and then go out and enjoy one small serving. The key is portion control. If you keep an entire box of cookies or pint of ice cream on hand, it
might be too easy to overindulge when a craving strikes. If this is the case, it might be better NOT to keep these foods on hand, but to go out for one scoop of ice cream or Mrs. Fields for one big cookie when a craving strikes. If portion control is not a problem for you, you might try keeping a bag of Hershey kisses or mini candy bars in your room, and eat one daily to satisfy your sweet tooth.

5. Eat slowly, passionately, and without guilt. Your eating style can make a HUGE impact on whether or not you overeat. If you eat standing up in the kitchen, quickly shoveling food into your mouth (directly from its original box or package), anxiously trying to finish before your roommate gets home and sees, you are more likely to overeat. On the other hand, if you place a reasonable portion of food (whatever food you want) onto a plate or into a cup, sit down at the dining room table, and eat it slowly, savoring every delicious bite without guilt, you are much more likely to feel satisfied and stop eating after your portion is gone.

6. Know what foods and eating situations trigger a binge. Then work to minimize or avoid them. Here are some examples:
   - Does having a gallon of ice cream in your freezer trigger a binge during finals week? Avoid keeping “trigger foods” in your house. Go out to enjoy one scoop of ice cream when a craving hits.
   - Does passing the coffee shop on the way to class every day trigger an urge to drop in for muffins and pastries? Try walking to class a different way.
   - Does coming home tired and stressed trigger a binge as soon as you walk in the door? Try changing your routine. Rather than going directly home when you’re feeling tired and stressed, go to a relaxing place (a park, the ocean, a yoga class). Then treat yourself to a healthy restaurant meal, go to the library or coffee shop to study (if needed), and then go home when you’re ready for bed.
   - Is it hard to stop eating after meals? Try brushing your teeth immediately after each meal or popping a piece of gum or mint in your mouth.
   - Does studying at home trigger a binge? Try studying in the library where food is not around.

7. Enjoy regular physical activity...not because you have to burn calories, but because it feels good and reduces stress. It’s very difficult to stay motivated to do something that is a punishment (i.e. “I have to exercise to punish myself for eating too much.”) On the other hand, it’s easy to make the time for things that make you feel good (i.e. “I always feel so energized and healthy after my morning walk; and it helps me study, work, and sleep better!”)

Moderate amounts of fun physical activity can really help fight stress and depression—common triggers for overeating. But, remember, the key is moderate amounts. Too much exercise can be just as damaging to your health as too little. And, excessive exercise can increase your risk of binge eating if you
don’t get adequate rest and consume adequate calories on a daily basis to support your heavy training routine. Aim for 3-5 days of aerobic activity per week (20-60 minutes per session), and 2-3 days of strengthening activities per week (30-40 minutes per session). As is the case for many things, more is not always better!

8. Determine what weight is a healthy weight for YOU. Each one of us has a healthy weight based on our genetics, muscle mass, and body type. Trying to achieve and/or maintain a weight that is too low for YOU is certain to result in binge eating and disordered behaviors. Sometimes it’s hard to accept the weight that is healthy for you (especially with the media’s ideal body in mind). But, learning to love your body is key to treating it with the respect and care it deserves.

9. Don’t expect to be perfect. Slips in eating are bound to happen, but that doesn’t mean you are a failure! And, it certainly doesn’t mean you’re going to gain weight. It takes an extra 3500 calories (above the normal 2000 calories or so you need to eat daily) to gain just 1 pound! You may feel bloated and sick after a binge, but it takes days and days of overeating to gain weight and body fat. Think about what you could have done differently to prevent the binge in the future, look at it as a learning opportunity, and then put it behind you and go back to your normal eating and physical activity routine. You may be tempted to restrict your food intake the next day, throw up what you just ate, or go to the gym for hours to burn the extra calories off. Remember the negative consequences of these behaviors and, most importantly, remember that they will just propel the vicious cycle of binge eating, rather than stop it.

10. Listen to your self-talk. That “little voice” in your head is your self-talk. Positive (or negative) self-talk can be very powerful. If you go into an exam, thinking “I can do this. I’m totally prepared. I’m going to ace this thing!” you’re far more likely to be successful than if you go in, worrying “I’m not ready for this. I’m going to fail!”