

Emotional Eating



While I am away on maternity leave, my newsletters will still be published monthly in the form of “Best of Jessica’s Nutrition Notes.” I am including past articles that have been popular and are also relevant to the themes of pregnancy and parenthood. Since parenthood can sometimes be stressful, I want to address the issue of emotional eating in this newsletter. Frustration, stress, fear, anger and exhaustion are some of the many reasons why people eat for reasons other than hunger. Of course, you don’t have to be a parent in order to struggle with emotional eating; people of all ages and life stages can grapple with this issue. I hope you will find this newsletter informative and the strategies for dealing with this self-destructive practice useful.

We all have different coping mechanisms for dealing with negative emotions and, unfortunately, many people turn to food to comfort themselves. This practice is called emotional eating. Emotional eating is defined as eating in response to emotional cues rather than true physical hunger. These emotional cues are usually negative (feeling sad, lonely, embarrassed, etc.), but they could also be positive emotions (feeling celebratory, convivial, happy, etc.). Do you think you could be an emotional eater? Answer the following three questions to find out:

- 1) Do you reward yourself with food?
- 2) Do you comfort yourself with food?
- 3) Do you use food to unwind or calm yourself down?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, then you may be an emotional eater. The truth is that everyone is an emotional eater from time to time. Even I reward myself with a piece of chocolate occasionally. Is this a behavior to be concerned about? It would be if I ate a



Gelson's registered dietitian, Jessica Siegel, has a Masters in Public Health. However, she is not a doctor and her nutritional recommendations are not tailored to specific health problems. Consult your physician before beginning any nutritional program. To contact Jessica, please call her at 1-800-GELSONS.

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whole box of chocolate rather than just one piece. When your rewards surpass moderation and move into the excessive category, then you have probably crossed over into emotional eating.

Emotional eating is a poor coping mechanism for many reasons. One significant reason is that it usually leads to overeating and weight gain. Most emotional eaters struggle with their weight and find that until they get their emotional eating under control, a healthy weight is impossible to maintain. Another reason is that emotional eating is a vicious cycle; you eat to suppress a negative emotion, but that suppression is only temporary. Once the “food high” wears off, you are left with those same bad feelings plus feelings of guilt and self-judgment, which in turn lead you to eat again. Finally, eating is not a constructive way of dealing with your problems. Food is only a temporary distraction from dealing with the serious issues with which you may be grappling.

You do have the power to change your eating behavior. Taking control of your emotional eating will give you a sense of accomplishment and help boost your self-esteem. If you feel that you are ready to take on your emotional eating and break the cycle right now, then read on for strategies that can help free you from this self-destructive practice.

1 Have a plan. When you sense that you are gearing up for some mind-numbing munching, have a defense plan in place that will help lure you away from eating. I love the idea of converting a cookie jar into an activity jar filled with scraps of paper that list different short, fun, healthful and relaxing activities. Write one activity per paper, such as take a bath, walk around the block, do 50 crunches, practice breathing for three minutes, drink a glass of water, play with your pet for five minutes and read a chapter in a book. When you want to climb into your cookie jar, head for the activity jar instead. A change of scenery is definitely in order, so make sure your activities take place outside of the kitchen.

2 Learn to recognize physical hunger. Begin to use the hunger scale to rate your hunger and satiety. The scale ranges from 1 to 5 where 1=very hungry, 2=somewhat hungry, 3=comfortable, 4=comfortably full and 5=very full. Every time you're about to eat, rate your hunger.



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The goal should be to always stay between a 2 and a 4, without going to either extreme. If you eat when you're a 1, then you've waited too long to evaluate your hunger. If you eat when you're a 4 or a 5, then you're practicing mindless munching. The purpose of the hunger scale is to help get you back in touch with your physical hunger rather than your emotional hunger. We are all born with the innate ability to regulate our appetites, but years of overeating, restricting and dieting have removed us from our sense of hunger and satiety. Combine the hunger scale with some mindfulness to help yourself start listening to your body. Eat when you are hungry and stop when you are full. This will take a lot of work because it requires really getting in touch with your body and listening to it each moment, while doing away with your self-judgments and

rationalizations. Learn to dislike the physical feeling of over-feeding yourself. Take the time to savor every aspect of your meals: the colors, aromas, textures, and flavors (this will require turning off the television).

3 Keep a food journal. Keeping a food journal can help you identify emotional eating and other eating patterns, like the times of day when you're most hungry and the times when you're not hungry but you still eat. It has been proven that people who use food journals are more successful at changing their eating behaviors and they have an easier time losing weight and keeping it off. The best way to use your journal is to write down the time you eat, what you eat, how much you eat, your hunger scale rating before and after you eat and how you are feeling emotionally and physically when you begin to eat. Journaling forces you to “own” your behavior and the foods you eat. Once you identify your emotional eating times, plan a different activity, like a brisk walk, for that time of day. Pay attention and learn to recognize the circumstances under which you're not actually hungry but you want to eat. You can also use a journal to help you identify specific activities that are eating triggers, such as watching TV, talking on the phone or eating with a certain person. Once you identify your eating triggers, go back to the “have a plan” section and work on your defense.

4 Seek psychological counseling. Psychotherapy is not for everyone, but it may be necessary to help you break out of the emotional eating cycle. A therapist can offer guidance and support for dealing with all of the scary issues and feelings that are being buried under food. The insights of an impartial person might be just what you need to start exploring (and changing) those chaotic emotions.

5 Get adequate exercise. One great strategy for getting in touch with your appetite is to get in touch with your body. Exercise can help relieve stress and possibly feelings of anger and aggression. It's also a great boredom fighter and certain activities can reduce loneliness if they are group or team events or if they take place at a gym. Another benefit is that exercise not only burns calories, but regular exercisers tend to eat fewer calories overall. It seems that exercise is a natural appetite suppressant. Meditation and yoga (a moving meditation) are excellent ways to relieve the emotions that lead to emotional eating. Mind-body techniques such as these are helpful for increasing self-awareness, meaning they can help you get in touch with your true feelings of hunger and satiety.

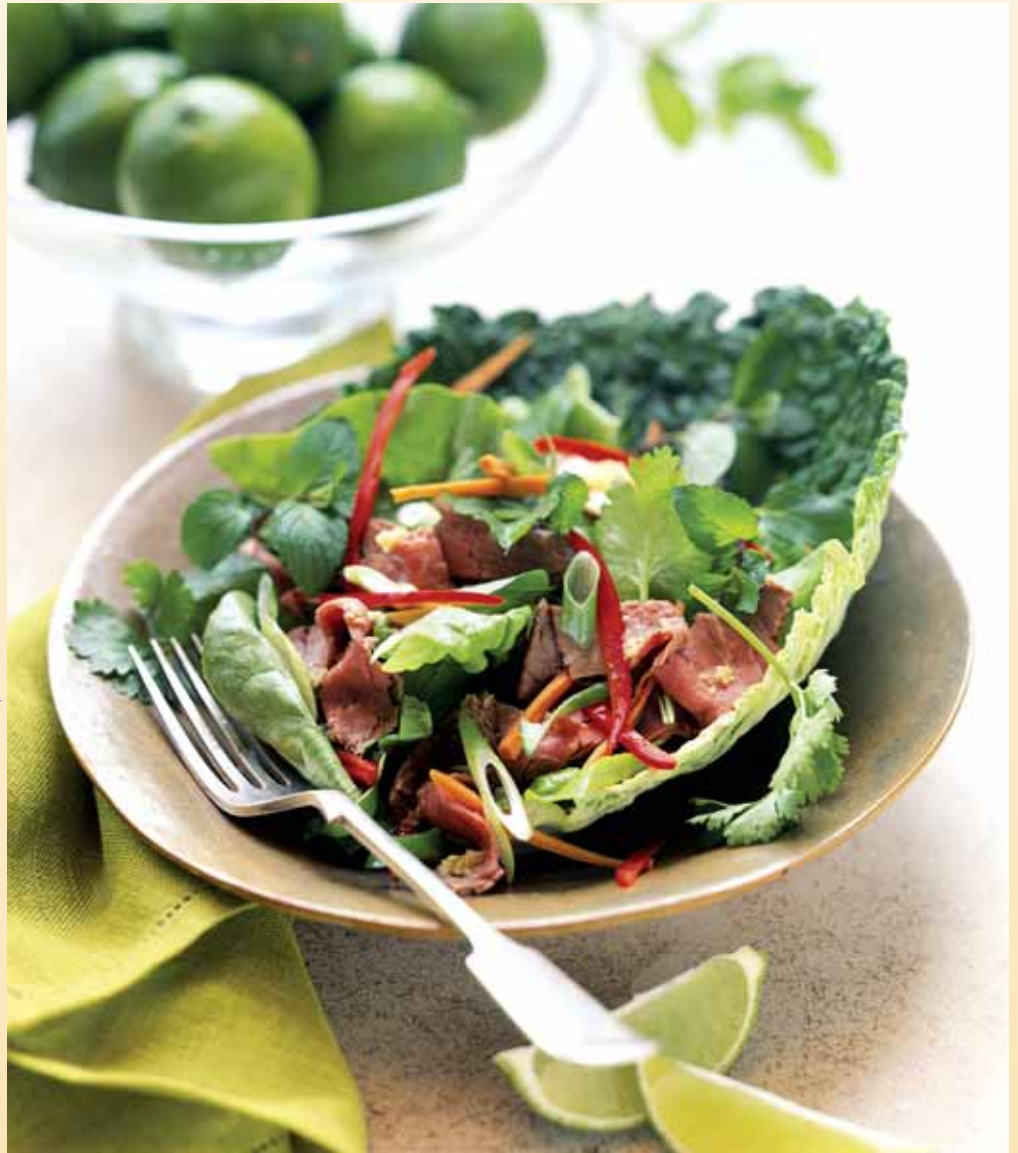
6 Get sufficient sleep. Sleep deprivation makes you hungrier and it weakens your resolve to eat well. We all know from experience that exhaustion will lower your standards for the types of food you will allow to pass through your lips. When you are well-rested, however, you will be much more likely to have the energy to fight your emotional eating urges and employ your defensive strategies.

7 Empower yourself with knowledge about healthy eating. Try to bring balance to every meal that you eat. Include at least two servings of produce, one serving of whole grains, one serving of protein, and a little bit of healthful fat at each meal. Eating well nourishes your body and your soul, which is important for building a sense of pride and self-respect. Another benefit of eating healthful, balanced meals is that your physical hunger is minimized, which in turn can help you better defend yourself against emotional eating.

8 Honor Yourself. Honoring yourself and your food should be your ultimate goal. Respect and listen to your body's needs and attempt to only put the highest quality, most thoughtfully prepared foods into it.

Feed yourself with love and respect, not fear or judgment, and you will see how easy it can be to achieve the weight and health that you desire.

Emotional eating is extremely common and, as I said, it tends to be exacerbated by children and other stressors, though it can be a habit that surfaces at any time. That's why now is as good of a time as any to break out of this behavior. You owe it to yourself to have a healthy relationship with food and to treat your body and emotions with respect. Making changes will take effort and planning and it may even be a little scary, but sometimes, like parenthood, the most difficult tasks can also be the most rewarding.



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Celebrate Organics

We at Gelson's are proud to offer you more organic food items this year than ever before.

Freshness, flavor and quality are just a few of the reasons why eating organic can be exciting and satisfying. You'll find organic foods in every department in our stores, and it's important to understand why they can be such a valuable addition to your diet:

Federal organic standards do not allow synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, or fungicides to be applied to organically grown foods before, during or after harvest. They also strictly limit pesticide use to organic pesticides, which are used only when necessary.

Organically raised poultry, meats, dairy, and eggs are not given any antibiotics or growth hormones. The animals also eat organic feed and have access to the outdoors.

Organic food is not genetically engineered or irradiated.

Our special "Organic" labels are prominently displayed throughout the store to help you identify organic items.

Look for organic foods in the produce, dairy, meat, and grocery aisles at Gelson's. These packaged foods will have the "USDA Organic" seal on them if at least 95% of their ingredients are organic.

Organic growing practices protect soil, air and water resources and promote biological diversity. Organic farmers rely on earth-friendly means to build natural nutrients in soil and to manage pests and weeds. Buying California-grown produce helps save fossil fuels and cuts greenhouse gas emissions, since the food does not have to travel very far from farm to fork.

Most of the organic produce we carry is very fresh because it is grown locally, so it is in our stores within one or two days of being harvested.



Organic produce is seasonal—when you buy your produce in season, it tastes fresher and tends to be more flavorful.

When high-quality organic foods are available from local growers, Ted Fujii, our produce buyer, makes them his first choice.

Quality is one of our top priorities at Gelson's and our produce is tested to meet stringent standards for acceptable pesticide levels before they leave the grower's hands.

Now Gelson's makes it easier to include more organic foods in your diet. For the first time, our stores are integrating organic items into our produce displays so that you won't have to visit a separate "organic" area to find your favorite fruit or vegetable.

New research indicates that organically grown produce has higher levels of disease-fighting antioxidants than conventionally grown crops (though conventionally grown foods still contain fair quantities of the protective



substances). So, try to buy organically grown produce when it's available, but don't forgo a fruit or vegetable simply because it's conventionally grown—what you eat in its place almost certainly won't be as healthy.

BON APPETIT!
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If you have any questions, please feel free to call Jessica at 1-800-GELSONS (435-7667) or visit our website www.gelsons.com for more nutrition information and store locations.