Curbing Overeating During the COVID-19 Pandemic

You Should Know

You are undoubtedly feeling stressed because of the fear, anxiety, and uncertainty related to the coronavirus pandemic – not to mention social distancing requirements and the increasingly challenging economic reality. When a stressful situation like this occurs, people typically experience changes in their eating habits. Emotional or stress eating refers to eating in an effort to suppress or soothe unpleasant or uncomfortable emotions. These changes might include overeating or binge eating.

In order to cope with strong emotions or stress, some people might eat large amounts of food in a short period of time while feeling unable to stop. Other people might "graze," eating constantly throughout the day or night. Eating serves as a welcome distraction from reality. You might crave food higher in fat and sugar when stressed, in part because your body requires more energy to function when stressed – simple carbohydrates do the trick.

Unfortunately, emotional overeating can lead to regret, physical discomfort, and weight gain. Here are some ways to curb emotional overeating:

• **Be aware of your feelings and let yourself feel them.** Take time each day to reflect on how you feel. Ask yourself: How am I feeling? When do I feel most stressed? What is most worrisome to me about my life? How are my feelings prompting me to eat in order to feel better? Am I actually physically hungry? Am I upset or distressed? Am I stressed or frustrated?

• **Recognize your triggers for overeating.** When are you most likely to want to overeat? Sometimes people or situations trigger you. If you are aware of your triggers, you will recognize when you are vulnerable to eating for emotional reasons. Triggers could be external, like having your children home and cooped-up or watching upsetting news stories. Triggers can also be internal, like thinking about how hard it is to work remotely or worrying about your financial situation. Ask yourself: When am I most likely to eat because I am stressed? What circumstances make it hardest for me to control my eating? What foods do I crave, and when?

• **Make conscious eating choices.** Choose what you will eat and when. Challenge yourself to cope with uncomfortable emotions and stress without using food to self-soothe. Ask yourself: Will I feel better after eating this? Is this something I am going to regret eating? What do I need to change to avoid overeating? Will this food nourish my body?

• **Get support.** You are probably isolated from your community, friends, and social networks right now. Yet, social connectedness is a core way you cope with stress. Ask yourself: Who can I call or text today that will help me remain emotionally grounded? What can I do to feel connected to my community? Overeaters Anonymous (www.oa.org) offers online meetings

• **Each day, start fresh.** If you overate because of unpleasant feelings, start again. Beating yourself up about past eating is not helpful. Instead, encourage yourself to start fresh right now—without judgment, guilt, or shame – and reestablish healthy eating while you acknowledge how you feel and encourage yourself moving forward.

• **Practice deliberate eating that promotes physical and emotional health**. Eating when you are not hungry is one way of coping with discomfort or upset. You might also overeat to avoid boredom, depression, anxiety, loneliness, stress, or other uncomfortable emotions. An important way to decrease overeating is to recognize when you have automatic reactions, and identify the difference between the need to eat because you are hungry and the desire to eat because you are upset. You can then choose alternatives to overeating.

Here are some practical strategies to overcome your urge to overeat.

- Before you eat, drink a glass of water and wait 10 minutes.
- Avoid eating while watching TV.
- Have healthy food on hand at home. You might be tempted to stock up; just limit the "junk" food you have on hand.
- Plan healthy snacks for times when you are vulnerable to overeating.
- Decide what you can do other than eating, e.g., walk your dog, watch a movie, garden, or ride your bike around the block. If you distract yourself the urge to eat will often pass.
- Engage in physical activity before dinner to relieve stress.

Other ideas: _____

_____

_____

What to Do

Choose five activities you will engage in when you have the urge to overeat:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Use the chart to track your urges to overeat. Describe the coping skill you used, and rate your level of distress using a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 = Not at all upset (relaxed and calm), to 10 = Very upset (you feel like you might explode), before and after engaging in the coping activity. Include comments about how you were feeling when you had the urge to overeat.

Date	Coping Skills	Distress rating before practicing skill (0-10)	Distress rating after practicing skill (0-10)	Situation	Comments
4/1	Call a friend to chat.	8	5	Urge to binge on ice cream after watching the news.	The news really stresses me out.

Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn about yourself during this exercise?

_____

_____

_____

What are your triggers for overeating or bingeing?

_____

_____

_____

What are the best coping strategies to avoid overeating you identified during this exercise?

_____

_____

_____

What can you do differently to make coping with stress while avoiding overeating easier? Are there other tools or resources you can use to delay or eliminate overeating?

_____

_____

_____