

Department of Family and Consumer Sciences

EATING WELL DURING STRESSFUL TIMES

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Emotional Eating

Difficult emotions like stress, sadness, anxiety and boredom affect us in many ways. Sometimes, people may respond to difficult emotions by overeating. About one in three adults in the United States report that they overeat or eat unhealthy foods due to stress. Half of the people who overeat because of stress say that they do so at least once a week.

Emotional Eating and Health

Overeating when we're experiencing difficult emotions can be bad for our health. Eating too many foods that are high in calories, added sugars and fats may lead to weight gain. Excess weight increases the risk for heart disease and diabetes.

Use a Food Diary

If you find yourself reaching for unhealthy food because of stress or other difficult emotions, use a food diary. A food diary helps you understand what you're doing now and where you can make a change. Keep track of the following information for a few days:

- Everything you had to eat and drink.
- How much you had to eat and drink.



- What time of day you had something to eat and drink.
- How you were feeling when you had something to eat and drink.
- What you were doing when you had something to eat or drink.
- How hungry you were when you had something to eat or drink.
- How full you felt after you had something to eat or drink.

Look for Patterns

Review your food diary and look for patterns. Do you see anything that surprises you?

- Do you tend to overeat when you are feeling certain emotions like stress?
- Is the amount of food you eat bigger than you realized?

Eating Well During Stressful Times

- Are there specific foods that you tend to eat when you are feeling stressed?
- Do you eat even when you are not hungry when you are feeling stressed?
- Do you overeat when you are feeling stressed?

Set a Goal for Yourself

Identify where you would like to make a change. To help you make a change, set SMART goals. These are goals that are:

- **Specific** — Your goal answers the question, “What am I going to do?”
- **Measurable** — Your goal should be measurable so that you can tell if it has been met.
- **Achievable** — Your goal should be something you can achieve right now considering your time and resources.
- **Relevant** — Your goal matches the results you want to achieve.
- **Timely** — Your goal should have a time frame so that you know when you should accomplish your goal.

For example, a goal might be to take a 15-minute walk in the afternoon at 2 p.m. on Monday, Wednesday and Friday for the next week.

Tips to Curb Stress Eating

Here are a few ideas to help you curb your stress and improve your health:

- **Get Active!** When you're feeling stressed, instead of reaching for an unhealthy snack, do something active. Physical activity is a great way to boost your mood. Take a walk or do exercises like yoga, squats, lunges or pushups.
- **Relaxation Activities.** Beat stress with a relaxation activity such as meditation, breathing exercises or guided imagery.
- **Assess Your Hunger.** Before you grab a snack, ask yourself if you're feeling hungry? Or are you eating because you are feeling stressed or bored?
- **Grab a Healthy Snack.** If you do find yourself reaching for a snack, focus on foods that are low in calories and full of vitamins, minerals and fiber.
 - **Sweet Snack Ideas:** Whole fruits, fruit slices with yogurt or peanut butter dip, low-fat yogurt parfait with berries.
 - **Crunchy Snack Ideas:** Carrot or celery sticks with hummus or low-fat dip, air-popped popcorn, whole grain crackers with low-fat cheese.
- **Out of Sight Out of Mind.** Reduce temptation by keeping unhealthy snacks like chips, candies or cookies out of easy sight. Consider replacing candy or snack bowls with a fruit bowl.
- **Limit Amounts of Unhealthy Snacks.** Measure a small amount of snacks like chips, cookies and candy onto a bowl or plate. Avoid eating from the package. You will probably eat more than you planned!

References:

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