

**REAL LIFE
CONFIDENTIAL**

A substitute for love

Food is life and we are what we eat. But what happens when we misuse food to **shore up negative feelings like sadness**, loneliness or boredom? Jola Chudy speaks to three self-confessed **'emotional eaters'** and finds out how to tackle this common problem

When Lizzie George*, 36, suffered a family bereavement it was, she believes, a trigger for her emotional eating. "When I was 21, my mother became very ill and died. This had a huge impact on me and the way I coped in life. It took a long time to accept the emptiness in my life and move forward, but then my dad became ill and subsequently died. I believe this was the start of me becoming emotionally dependent on food."

Lizzie, a manager, has lived in Dubai for two years and says that her unhealthy relationship with food led to negative self image and weight problems. "I used to reach for food even if I wasn't hungry... through boredom, or just because I knew it was there in the cupboard. If I was stressed at work or going through relationship issues, food would be my comforter. I would binge eat, reaching for bread and making sandwiches. I don't have a sweet tooth but

I would still binge on sweets and chocolate. I became overweight and felt heavy and sluggish. I didn't feel healthy and I got pretty down on myself. I knew it was a vicious circle."

Many of us know the familiar feeling of an afternoon slump at work, when a slice of cake or bag of potato chips seems like the solution to feelings of fatigue or clock-watching. If we're home alone, 'grazing' on whatever happens to be in the fridge or pantry can be a way to pass the time and fill a niggling feeling of loneliness or boredom. But what happens when those occasional moments of eating for reasons other than hunger (and let's face it, we all occasionally eat when we're not hungry) become more of an issue?

what is emotional eating?

Emotional eating is when people turn to food to ease the discomfort of a feeling



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“FEELINGS LIKE BOREDOM, REJECTION, DISAPPOINTMENT, OR ANGER CAN BE TEMPORARILY FORGOTTEN WHILE WE DIG INTO ICE-CREAM, CHOCOLATE OR COOKIES”

like boredom, rejection, disappointment, or anger. These can be temporarily forgotten while we dig into ice-cream, chocolate or cookies, explains Yvonne Morgan, a registered clinical hypnotherapist, working with Dubai-based company Regime. Yvonne's background includes training with famous mind-reader and magician Paul McKenna, before she established a practice in the UK, offering hypnotherapy and personal development consultancy. She now offers cognitive behavioural therapy to help clients make positive changes; emotional eating is one of her specialities.

“Many ‘comfort foods’ are high in sugar and so give us a lift by raising our blood sugar and elevating our mood. Emotional eating is not triggered by physical hunger, but by the pain of whatever emotion is being experienced,” says Yvonne. “The emotional eater can eat vast quantities of food in the quest to get rid of a feeling – often eating more than he or she would if she were eating ‘normally’.”

“If I am feeling down, I tend to reach for fatty, ‘comfort’ foods like burgers, chocolate and crisps,” admits Rahma Habib*, 23, a sales manager living in Dubai. “I live alone, so I find myself eating through boredom and loneliness. When I eat fatty foods due to being down, I feel worse afterwards, but while I am doing it, it feels like the best thing to do.”

food for thought

Food is one of our most basic survival needs. As children we also learn the emotional value of food and the power it has to change how we feel. We may have been given sweets to ease the pain of a grazed knee or to stop us crying, and so the pattern of food as comfort is laid down early in life. We also learn the social aspect of eating



and sharing celebratory meals with friends and families.

“Signs of emotional eating differ from person to person, but include eating very quickly, eating large quantities of one type of food, eating as an instant response to an emotional trigger and feeling guilty and ashamed afterwards,” explains Yvonne. The main triggers are stress (in the form of anger, anxiety or depression),

boredom, loneliness and sadness.

Emi Beredugo, a 32-year-old senior recruitment consultant, admits to overeating out of boredom. “It gives me something to do. I overeat on savoury foods and meat; I worry about the physical effects as, even though I am an active person who enjoys rugby and netball, I feel quite sluggish and regretful afterwards. At five foot four inches, and a UK size 14 I could probably do with losing a bit of weight, despite the fact that I have a high density of muscle.”

Emotional eating keeps you locked in a vicious cycle, says Yvonne. “It can lead to obesity and health problems and trap you into never finding strategies for coping with life’s challenges. It also lowers self-esteem, which in turn promotes more overeating.”



SMOOTH OPERATOR
A fruit smoothie doesn't count as healthy if you add Smarties and ice-cream – sorry!

So, if you've got a problem, what can be done to solve it?

making changes

The first steps to tackling emotional eating are to acknowledge that this is a response pattern that you no longer want, says Yvonne. “New patterns need to be laid down in order to replace the old ones – recognising your triggers and re-training yourself to wait before reacting. When we can stay calm and look beyond the moment of discomfort or pain, we regain control and can choose a new reaction.” Yvonne's approach is holistic – treating both the symptom and the cause. Clients are taught to relax. “I ask them to keep a mood and food diary so we can examine their triggers and come up with solutions. Of course, there are no magic fixes, but with a real desire to change, most clients need fewer than 10 sessions.”

Cognitive therapy and hypnotherapy can see real results fast. One of Yvonne's clients came to her as her weight was spiralling out of control. She said she had no will-power as she had tried every diet there was. During the first session, the woman revealed that she did everything for her family. “Her retired husband did nothing at home nor did her three granddaughters who were living with her,” explains Yvonne. “From morning to night, she was cook, cleaner, taxi-driver, problem solver... the one person she wasn't looking after was herself. Food was her chance to escape the demands that others put on her. She would eat huge plates of hot buttered toast and gorge her way through

the expert Yvonne answers reader's questions



Q Whenever I'm stressed or have a deadline, I find myself reaching for the fridge door. I'll buy cookies and doughnuts to see myself through the afternoon. My colleagues seem to get through the day without these snacks and I feel self-conscious about eating at my desk. I've started eating in secret in the stationery room. Why can't I bring myself to stop?

A The refined sugar causes a rise in blood sugar and gives you a short burst of energy; this chemical high also causes your mood to lift temporarily. As blood sugar level drops, so does your mood and you need another cookie or doughnut. Eat a balanced breakfast and lunch with slow-release carbs (oats, fruit, salads) and take fruit to snack on during the afternoon. You may also benefit from stress-management techniques, such as relaxation.

Q My boyfriend and I split up. I've always had a tendency to reach for food as a comfort but it's spiralling out of control. I've been bingeing to make myself feel better. Help, how do I stop?

A You have been using food as a source of comfort from the pain of your break up. You can't give up eating as you need to eat to live, so you need to develop a different relationship

with food, which is based on your body's nutritional needs. You can break this cycle by doing the following: take regular exercise as this will help boost your mind's own natural anti-depressants; make time each day to relax to keep stress levels down and re-train yourself to eat slowly so that you can re-tune yourself to the natural signal that is given off when your stomach is content. Eat three balanced meals a day; take up a new hobby; get some support from friends or family or a therapist to see you over this difficult time.

Q I am worried about my partner. When he comes home from work, the first thing he does is reach for the family pack of Doritos and hunch over his computer. He barely speaks to me, just roams back and forth to the kitchen eating. He's put on weight, but won't admit there's a problem. Is he eating emotionally? I try to have dinner ready for when he gets home, so he shouldn't be hungry.

A It sounds as if your partner may be suffering from mild depression. It may be stress at work and if he isn't eating at lunchtime he will then eat the very first thing he can find when he comes home. Eating more carbs can be another symptom of depression – they have a calming effect on the brain as well as boosting production of serotonin, the brain's natural anti-depressant. Try asking him how things are going at work or changing your routine when he comes home from work – go for a walk or to the cinema – to see if this breaks his pattern.

boxes of chocolates.” During the sessions, Yvonne focused on giving the woman permission to focus on her own needs. “At no time did we discuss food or diets. Our fifth session was just after the Christmas holidays and she gleamed with pride as she told me she had lost weight and not opened a single box of chocolates!”

Lizzie also embarked on a course of hypnotherapy with Yvonne and says of the experience, “I had an initial consultation where I talked about my issues and Yvonne was able to establish ways to help me reprogramme my behaviour patterns. I had about eight sessions in total. At the time my relationship with food was not an equal one, it was just there to be eaten when I

needed it. Now I understand food, I am healthy and I exercise regularly and I enjoy food. I have learnt to have a healthy relationship with food.”

**Some names have been changed*
If you think you have a problem with emotional eating, you can contact Yvonne Morgan at Regime (www.regime.ae) by emailing yvonne@regime.ae or calling 055 556 7485

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Regime organises seminars called ‘Fuel your Body, not your Mind’. If you want to find out more, see www.regime.ae for details of upcoming events that deal with how to identify triggers and break the cycle of emotional eating – for good.