EMOTIONAL EATING AND HOW NOT TO DO IT
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Before choosing a diet, click here to use the Diet Calculator which will tell you what kind of eater you are and which diet you should follow.

What is emotional eating?
By emotional eating we mean a person who is stressed, hassled, upset or feeling bad for any number of reasons is likely to eat more than they really might have wanted to do or more than might have been the case if they had been feeling ok. If this sounds like your experience we have written this booklet to help you understand why you do it and help you not do it.

Why do diets go wrong?
Many people think that dieting or following a healthy eating and exercise plan is all about willpower. If you have the willpower you will not give in to temptation. Instead you will power on past the cakes and other tempting foods, stick to your diet and get there in the end. You will be like the athlete, training for mile after mile, only looking only at your watch to keep your pace up, driven only by an internal drive to push your legs further. Have you got that kind of willpower? Perhaps not. Most of us don’t but the good news is that sticking to a plan is a lot less about this kind of determination than most people think. I suggest you lose the idea that it’s all about willpower. Don’t tell yourself that when you fail at a weight loss plan you lack willpower. There’s a much better way of thinking about things.

Why do we do what we do?
There’s a simple rule to remember that will help you think differently about sticking to your plans, even when you are upset and it is this:

“At every single moment of our lives, we act in pursuit of what we most want or need at that moment”.

Let me try to explain what I mean by this. For example, I imagine you brush your teeth every day. If I were to ask you why you brush your teeth you could probably give me some reasons why it is a good idea to brush your teeth, but does that really explain why you do it? Probably not. You brush your teeth because you always do it, you always do it at the same time, and you don’t sit and ponder whether brushing them is a good idea, or weigh up the pros and cons. You brush your teeth because you always do. You can imagine a 1000 things you would enjoy doing rather than brushing your teeth, I am sure. However, you don’t
agonise about it, you don’t summon up willpower and (metaphorically) grit your teeth to take you through the tedious two minutes of brushing. You just do it. Why? Because it is a habit. Your brain’s automatic system is in control and at the same time every morning you brush your teeth. You can probably barely remember the experience after it is completed. Your automatic brain is in charge of the actions and your conscious brain can spend time on other things, for example imagining doing some of the 1000 more pleasurable things you’d like to do.

So, I said that at every moment, including brushing your teeth, you act in pursuit of what you most want and need at that moment. But I also said that there are 1000 things at least that are more enjoyable than brushing your teeth. How do we square that? Well remember that question about why you brush your teeth? You probably had lots of reasons about having teeth to eat your food, a nice smile, or to kiss someone without them recoiling in horror. These are all good and sensible reasons to brush your teeth. When you were younger your parents probably nagged you to brush your teeth knowing that you may not have held such notions strongly. And then they stopped because it became a habit and you just did it. And now it’s easy. It’s a healthy habit that you would never miss even if temptation got in the way.

What we are aiming for with your weight loss programme is to change your old patterns of behaviour, many of which are as ingrained as brushing your teeth, and swap them for new patterns of behaviour. And unlike learning the habit of brushing your teeth, your parents won’t be there to nag you until it becomes automatic. So how do we get to healthy habits? And, just as importantly, how do we lose unhealthy ones?

**Wanting do the right thing and doing the wrong thing**

Why are you losing weight? To lose a stone or two? To be fitter? To avoid health problems?

All of these are goals that are far off in the future. And when the pressure is on at work, you’re feeling down because your partner was unkind, and then there’s someone’s birthday, so you think ‘I’ll have a piece of cake. I’ll diet tomorrow. It would be rude not to.’ Or you sit and munch your way through a pack of biscuits after a bad day. So following our rule, you know that at that moment you acted in pursuit of what you most wanted or needed at that moment. You broke your eating plan because you wanted to. And yet another part of you clearly didn’t want to. You really do want to lose weight, no question. And you said you would to all those people. I imagine that you think this is where the willpower comes in. And you probably tell yourself you don’t have a lot of that. And that’s where it all goes wrong for you.
So what can you do instead? The key to this is to remember that at every moment you pursue what you most want at that moment. Take your goals. If they are to lose a stone or two stones how motivating is that? Probably not very much. It’s an abstract concept that feels very dry. What you need to do instead is to imagine the state of having lost two stones? How will you feel at that moment when the scales show you? Imagine the pleasure you will feel? What will happen when you tell your family or friends? What will they say? How would you feel then? What kind of clothes will wear then? How will you feel when you look at yourself in the mirror? Or what will you be able to do in that imagined future that you can’t do now or is so hard for you to do now? How will that feel to be doing those things you can’t now? Imagine yourself there kicking the ball around with your grandson. What will that feel like? When you do this kind of thing you are creating a positive attractive future for yourself that you will feel attracted to. A future you want and it feels much more real doing this than it does saying ‘to lose a stone’. Think of all the things that will be better for you then and run through a movie in your head. Imagine them as if they were real. Don’t you want them more now than you did before you did this exercise?

The next thing you can do is imagine a different future for yourself. This is the future where you don’t stick to your goals. Your weight is much the same as it is today. How will that feel? When you look at yourself in the mirror in your ‘fat clothes’ how will that feel? When you can’t do the things you want to do, how will that feel? That’s a future you really don’t want. One you want to escape. Well you know you can give yourself relief from those feelings from losing weight.

This isn’t an exercise in willpower, but it is doing what advertisers do to change our behaviour. It is giving us positive emotions and images to which we feel attracted and negative emotions and images from which we need relief. And while they’re trying to sell us a more or less useless product we are trying to boost our motivation to act in pursuit of our goals. Remember, we act in pursuit of what we most want or need at every moment. So, having imagined these futures I hope you feel that you want the positive image more than you did.
Exercise: what are your goals?

It is so helpful to our motivation to imagine our future that I suggest you write down your goals here. Before you do, I want to give some advice. Try to make those goals as tangible as possible. Instead of writing ‘to improve my health’ write instead ‘to be able to walk up stairs without getting breathless’. The more real you make your motives, the easier it is to imagine them and how they will feel when you achieve your goal. Once you have written down your motives, spend some time imagining them. Try to feel how you will feel. Imagine who is in the room with you? Who are you talking to? How does it feel inside? Is your companion smiling? How does that make you feel?

I suggest one healthy habit for you to get into is to take this list with you. You’re going to need it in moments where you are not feeling as strong as you are now. Another healthy habit is to rehearse it. You have run through your list and you have imagined. The more you let your brain run over these images of how you will feel the better prepared it will be to do it when you are feeling weak. Remember athletes train at their sport and you need to train at boosting your motivation.

Only you can decide whether the positive attractive images work best for you - your future self without all this extra weight - or the negative ones - the future when you have not lost the weight. Perhaps you can practise both ways of thinking so you are ready.

A focus on the moment

We act in pursuit of what we most want or need at every moment of our lives. So far, we have talked about motivation to lose weight but we also must remember needs. What goes wrong? The moment goes wrong. Instead of feeling upbeat and motivated you feel down. A hard day, you feel tired, low mood, you’re hungry and the biscuits are just there because the kids left them out. You know that one will help you feel better and get on with cooking the tea and what harm can one do? And before you know it half the packet is gone. What went wrong in this moment was need. Need dominated your motivation. A need is an unpleasant sensation that we seek relief from. In this case, you wanted relief from being tired, hungry and low and thought one biscuit would give you that. And then habit probably took over and your one biscuit led to several more just because it usually has in the past. How are you going to stop this happening in the future?

Well this is where sticking to your plan is hard. Your resources are low and habits take over so easily in this setting. What can you do to boost your resolve? Here’s where I hope you are so glad you have run through your ‘wanting routine’ I suggested you try. Your desire to lose
weight has to overwhelm your need from relief from those bad feelings you feel right now. Right here, right now before you do anything else imagine yourself having lost that weight. Remember, you are feeling down, it’s been a hard day. The tea can wait. Take a moment to yourself and try to boost your feelings of wanting to lose weight. Those biscuits are likely to keep flicking back into your mind but try to concentrate. Get out your list and run through it.

**Tips for dealing with those moments**

What else can you do in the moment? One tip is to think of your reasons for losing weight and imagining how you will feel when you achieve your goals or how you will feel if you don’t. But there are other things you can do too and here are some of them.

1. **Distraction.** When temptation strikes do something else. Take your mind off your needs (your feeling of needing relief).

2. **Delay.** You feel bad now, but you know you won’t always feel like that. Perhaps in a few minutes you will feel better. Maybe then you won’t feel so strongly like you need the biscuits. You can promise yourself that if you still feel like this in 10 minutes then it’s fair enough to have one. But you can last 10 minutes without a biscuit can’t you? Check your watch and wait 10 minutes. If that wasn’t so bad, maybe you can give yourself another 10 minutes?

3. **Drink water.** Part of the problem here is that your stomach is calling to you. You will feel better if you fill it up. Fill it up with water. Or how about giving your mouth a treat with something that has very few or no calories but tastes good. Chewing gum? Black coffee? Diet drinks?

4. **Don’t distress.** Accept instead. Take a moment and look within yourself. Feel your frustration or your annoyance, or your low mood but try to let it wash over you. It’s your distress that is driving you to want to eat. Now concentrate on the emotion, notice it, notice how your body is feeling - what is it like? - But let the distress go. This technique is related to mindfulness. Look at some information about using acceptance or mindfulness on You Tube. If that works for you, practise using it.
Why do you eat when you get stressed?

This is typical of you, but not everyone does it. Have you ever stopped to wonder why you respond this way? Finding out why and changing that is possible and will make it much easier for you to stick to your diet. You could probably spend ages going back in time and trying to figure out where this came from but that is unlikely to help. Instead, you are better to spend your time understanding what maintains your behaviour now and how you can change it.

You eat when you are stressed because of the thought patterns you have built up over the years that are so well worn that you don’t even recognise them anymore. They have become automatic. You can change those thoughts if you can

- catch them
- check them
- and change them

If you do, you will be on the way to changing your behaviour. In this case, your thoughts are almost certainly untrue and certainly unhelpful so changing them would be a great idea. Here’s how you can start. It will take practice to get good at this.

Some examples of automatic thoughts that are unhelpful

Are these close to any thoughts you have?

- I don’t understand why I am overweight. I eat the same as my friend and he is slim
- Losing weight will be awful. I will be hungry all the time
- I don’t want to spend my life obsessed with counting calories
- I am so overweight, there’s no way I can lose enough weight
- I’ve just blown my diet now. It’s no good, I might as well give up
- I will worry about losing weight later, I just need to feel better now
- I’ve done so well, I deserve a treat
- I want to eat right now and I am not allowed to. I feel miserable
These automatic thoughts stem from negative emotions and quickly follow on from them. When you are trying to find out about your thoughts, think to those times when you have felt strong negative emotions. Now think about what was going through your mind. It will help you to do this if you write it down.

**Catch it**
What do you think in moments when your resolve falters and you break your diet? It might be thoughts like ‘I cannot deal with anything right now?’ or ‘I just can’t manage to diet’.

**Check it**
Your next step is to try to understand that thought a little more. ‘I cannot deal with anything right now’ means something like ‘I am really stressed. I feel awful. I think eating these biscuits will make me feel better’. Work out what your thoughts mean in a series of simple propositions like these. Now have a look at each of these and see if they are really true. The key one here is the last one ‘I think eating biscuits will make me feel better’. Really? Imagine you had a friend who was having a tough time. Would you take her a packet of biscuits? It seems unlikely. And if it won’t make your friend feel better why do you imagine it would help you? How exactly do you think biscuits will help? Isn’t it just that you have given yourself a moment when you do something you really like and can relax?

**Change it**
So you have checked your thoughts and you feel that the thought is not correct. Now you have to change it so that next time you are in this situation you can think differently. If you can manage to change these thoughts and think differently every time it will become a habit and the natural and easy thing to do.

So you have decided that in moments of real stress what you really need is a moment to yourself where you can do what you want for a while but somehow you have got into the habit of assuming that moment must mean eating. You could decide now on a new thought to replace the old one, something like ‘I am really stressed. I feel awful. Taking a moment where I do just what I want will make me feel better’. Now your job is to think through this proposition so that you have it in your mind for when stress comes. It would help to make some plans for what you are going to do in moments of stress that will give you that mental space you need to recover yourself and get back to it. Next time the stress comes you will be ready to catch the thought, check it is right, and change it if necessary. Doing this will take practice, but this technique is proven and it could work.
Another automatic and unhelpful thought

Have you ever had the situation where you stick to a diet and then something goes wrong and you ‘blow’ your diet by eating a banned food? What happens then? For many people this leads to several days of going off track before they bring themselves back. Here’s what you can do to get back on track sooner.

Catch it
We’ve looked at lapses in the last section, so now we need to look for those thoughts that led you off track for several days. Follow the emotion to find the thought. Perhaps it was something like ‘I am so disappointed in myself. I have let myself down again. I have no willpower. I am a failure and might as well just accept that and be fat and happy’.

Check it
Let’s look at some of these thoughts and check them.

- Is willpower a useful concept? I hope you agree with me now that motivation exists in the moment and that at that particular moment your need for relief overwhelmed your desire to stick to your goals. That’s all.
- Does one lapse mean the diet has failed? In a typical weight loss diet you are trying to have a deficit of about 3500 calories in a week. Even in a blow-out you might have 1000 extra calories. Sure, that’s not good, but if you were back on track straight away you would still be 2500 calories down for the week and still lose weight. A blow out does not mean you will never lose weight.
- Does one lapse mean you are a failure? You would never say that to anyone else and you would genuinely mean it. Why be so hard on yourself? Lapses are a normal part of dieting and you need to try to reduce them, but a person who lapses is not a failure.

Change it
Now you have realised your thoughts are not correct it should be easy enough to change. ‘I am so disappointed I had a lapse. I need to learn about my motivation and how to use strategies better to help me next time. But one lapse has not ruined my diet because if I get back on track now I will still lose weight this week. I know that when I stand on those scales at the end of the week I will still feel proud of myself. Won’t that be a great moment?’
How does group support help?

We have recommended that emotional eaters use a group support programme. This has lots of things that will help you in general. The exercise and eating plan has been worked out carefully and will give you a balanced diet and, if you follow it, help you lose weight. But how will it help you with your emotional eating?

One feature that all group programmes share is the weigh-in. And many people who go to these groups say that the most important thing is the weigh-in. You know that you will be weighed at the end of the week. This will help you in moments of stress when you are tempted to break your diet. Now you can call to mind the image of you standing on the scales and you can imagine what it will feel like to stand on them and have lost your weekly weight target or what it might feel like if you have not lost it. And this thought will keep you going in those tough times. It will bolster your desire to stick to your diet and defend you against the needs taking over and running you down a familiar path. The end of the week is so much closer in time than the next time you come to Liverpool and the need to feel good in that moment will be stronger.

In particular, we have asked that you all keep in touch with one another. You will probably get to know your group members and it really helps the group if you are losing weight. It gives the group its sense of purpose and identity. This feeling that you are no longer alone is encouraging but also your sense that you do not want to let the team down will also help stiffen your resolve when you face temptation. You are not alone; you are fighting for the team. And you don’t want to let your team down. It’s not just yourself now, the others need you and you need them. Again, when emotional need strikes at your resolve those others will be there metaphorically at your side to keep you to your plan.

This is a tough journey. You are trying to break the habits of a lifetime and these kick in right when your resources are lowest. Your new friends will help you spot what is going on (catch it), identify the faulty thoughts (check it), and give you new solutions (change it). You are all in this together and you will probably find many people with the same kind of problems as you have and sharing solutions will really help.

That’s it. Good luck and we all hope you succeed.