

# ***Disordered Eating: Emotional Overeating***

## **Battling the Binge & Stopping the Cycle**

Brian is a grad student struggling to complete his dissertation. But, there just doesn't seem to be enough hours in the day. In addition to taking his last two required academic classes, he is working as a TA for his department, holds an additional part-time job 20 hours per week, and has to commute to UCLA from Long Beach. To make matters worse, he is not getting along with his academic advisor and his girlfriend just broke up with him because he wasn't spending enough time with her. Prior to grad school, Brian was really active and fit, and he followed a very regimented healthy eating plan. Now, however, it has become increasingly difficult for him to find the time to work-out and to eat regular, balanced meals, and this really bothers him. Exhausted, overwhelmed, depressed, and lonely, Brian often gets home and goes directly to the refrigerator. He polishes off the remaining half of his roommate's extra large pizza, ½ box of cookies, an entire bag of chips, and a pint of Ben & Jerry's ice cream. Later that night, still disgusted with all the junk he has eaten and terrified that it will turn into fat while he sleeps, Brian goes out for a 2-hour run to burn off the extra calories. He promises himself that he will never let his eating get out of control again. Brian is suffering from emotional overeating.

## ***Negative Effects of Binge Eating***

It's normal (and healthy) to sometimes eat for emotional reasons. For instance, we may eat certain foods to help us celebrate holidays and other special events. These foods carry deep cultural, religious, or familial meanings and eating them makes us feel happy. In addition, we may eat certain foods to comfort us in times of sickness or temperature extremes (i.e. chicken noodle soup when we're sick, hot chocolate when we're shivering from the cold, and a cool frozen treat when the temperatures are soaring).



But it is NOT healthy when food becomes our main source of relief when we are feeling stressed, depressed, and overwhelmed; and our eating becomes out of control as we desperately attempt to stuff down all our negative emotions and/or numb all our uncomfortable feelings. Consider all the negative unhealthy effects that may result.

### **Emotional consequences**

Probably the most significant negative health effect that results from this type of eating behavior is the extreme guilt, self-loathing, disgust, anxiety, and depression that may come after the overeating episode. Often, these feelings are so extreme that you feel paralyzed from doing anything (i.e. you can't study, you can't work, you can't play). And, you may also isolate yourself from family, friends, and romantic partners--the very people you need most to feel better.

### **Behavioral consequences**

As a result of the extreme guilt and anxiety, you may take desperate measures to get rid of the extra calories you just consumed (i.e. vomiting, using laxatives, diuretics or diet pills, exercising excessively, and/or fasting or very restrictive dieting to compensate). Not only are these measures NOT effective, but they also carry significant health consequences.

**Self-induced vomiting** does not get rid of all the calories just consumed. In fact, an after-binge vomiting episode retains approximately 1200 of the calories consumed. Much of the weight loss is due to fluid losses, not fat losses. Vomiting can also result in acid/base and electrolyte imbalances in the blood, which can be fatal. And, the stomach acid that comes up with vomiting causes tears in the esophagus, stomach ulcers, gastrointestinal bleeding, and severe tooth decay.

**Laxatives** act on the large intestine (after food calories have already been absorbed) and cause increased water weight loss through more frequent/watery bowel movements--not fat loss! At most, there is only a 12% reduction in calories consumed. Most calories are already absorbed by the time they reach the large intestine. Over time, you can become dependent on laxatives to have a bowel movement at all.

**Diuretics** act on the kidneys and cause increased water weight loss through urination. They have NO effect on food calories or fat loss. They do, however, cause dehydration and electrolyte imbalances (such as low blood potassium levels), which can lead to an irregular heart beat and death.

**Over-the-counter diet pills** may work to suppress appetite temporarily, increase metabolic rate slightly, and/or induce a laxative effect (which causes fluid, not fat, loss). But, many of these products contain ephedra (ma huang), which can cause serious problems such as increased blood pressure, arrhythmias (heart rate irregularities), insomnia, nervousness (anxiety), tremors, headaches, seizures, heart attacks, strokes, and even death! While the ads for these products boast impressive results, in reality, their effect on weight loss is relatively minor. There is no magical pill that can shed pounds without some life-long adjustments in eating and activity patterns.

**Excessive exercise** can cause overuse injuries (like stress fractures), fatigue, sleep disturbances, reduction of sex hormones, and in women, cessation of menses (which contributes to bone loss, osteoporosis, and infertility). Further, too much exercise can actually prevent fitness gains. For example, if you don't give your muscles adequate time to recover between resistance training sessions, they can't rebuild and grow.

**Fasting and restrictive eating** results in depressed metabolic rate, loss of more lean body mass vs. fat tissue, multiple nutrient deficiencies, constipation, lightheadedness, fatigue, depression, and in women, cessation of menses (which contributes to bone loss, osteoporosis, and infertility). Further, restrictive eating greatly increases your risk for another binge eating episode.

### **Physical consequences**

Eating large amounts of food very quickly at one time may cause abdominal pain and upset, extremely high blood sugar and insulin levels (which can make you feel dizzy and nauseous), and extreme tiredness (so all you can do is "sleep it off"). Certainly, these physical affects are going to interfere with your studies and your social life.

Further, repeated episodes of binge eating will eventually result in weight gain. If you are underweight due to restrictive eating in the past, the weight gain may be necessary to restore your health. In fact, in this case, the binge eating episodes may be a natural and necessary physiological response to your starvation (and once your weight and eating are restored, you may find that the binge eating stops). However, if you are gaining excessive weight and become obese, you are increasing your risk for a number of medical problems, including high blood pressure, heart disease, gall bladder disease, insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes, joint problems, osteoarthritis, and sleep disorders.

## **Why can't I just stop?**

You may feel like you should be able to control your eating and that you should have greater self-discipline to stick to your diet. But, it's not that simple. It's not your fault! There are many strong physiological and psychological triggers that may be contributing to your binge eating episodes. Discovering what your triggers are is the first step to overcoming them.

### **Physiological triggers**

There are many physiological triggers that may cause you to overeat:

**Inadequate calorie intake during the day:** Whether you are intentionally restricting your intake during the day (for weight control) or unintentionally skipping meals/snacks (due to time constraints), inadequate calories during the day can result in overeating later.

NOTE: Many students claim that they don't feel hungry during the day. This may be because of the stress hormones that are released when your body is starving (which temporarily raise blood sugar and suppresses appetite). Or, it may be that you are so preoccupied with what you're doing that you don't pay attention to your body's signals. Or, it could be that your body has simply adapted to functioning with less fuel. In any case, while you may not feel hungry, your body knows when it's been in a calorie deficit, and it remembers. Be sure to eat every 3-5 hours to avoid getting overly hungry.

**Excessive exercise:** You don't seem to be restricting your calorie intake. After all, you're eating just as much as your friends are. But, if you are exercising very intensely (for an hour or more) on most days of the week, your calorie needs are far higher than your friends,' and your body knows it! Without extra calories on a daily basis to cover your higher daily energy demands, it's very likely that you will eventually have a binge eating episode.

**Inadequate protein and/or fat intake with meals or snacks:** Protein and fat take longer to be digested and absorbed than carbohydrate, so you feel full longer after you eat them. In addition, both protein and fat trigger the satiety (or fullness) center in your brain, whereas carbohydrate tends to raise levels of hormones and brain chemicals (like insulin and neuropeptide Y, respectively) that are associated with food cravings. If you are just eating carbohydrate rich foods alone at meals and snacks, without some protein and fat along with it, you are more likely to have food cravings



(especially for more carbohydrate and sugar) later on in the day. Have you ever heard it said that “the more sugar you eat, the more sugar you want.” It’s true! Of course, not everyone experiences increased sugar cravings and appetite after eating carbohydrate foods alone. And not all carbohydrate foods affect cravings and appetite the same. But, it’s worth considering. How long do you stay full after eating each of the following afternoon snacks?

	Snack	Calories	Composition
1) OR	1.5 cup fat free frozen yogurt	About 300	Mostly low fiber carbohydrate (51 g)
2)	1 cup Edamame (boiled soybeans)	About 300	Good mix: 30 g protein + 18 g carbohydrate (high fiber) + 16 g fat
1) OR	4 Snackwell Fat Free Cookies	About 200	Mostly low fiber carbohydrate (48 g)
2)	1 slice whole wheat bread with 1 Tbsp. peanut butter	About 200	Good mix: 18 g carbohydrate (high fiber) + 8 g fat + 6 g protein
1) OR	40 small jelly beans	About 160	Mostly low fiber carbohydrate (40 g)
2)	1 oz string cheese with 1 whole apple	About 160	Good mix: 21 g carbohydrate (high fiber) + 8 g protein + 5 g fat

**Inadequate sleep:** Most people need somewhere between 7 and 8 hours of sleep every night. If your body is chronically sleep-deprived, your levels of cortisol (a stress hormone) will be elevated throughout the day. High cortisol levels are associated with increased appetite and increased cravings (especially for sugary or starchy foods). In addition, without adequate rest, you may be more inclined to eat to keep yourself awake.

**Some disease states and medications:** Many medications and some disease states cause increased appetite as a side effect. It’s a good idea to discuss any changes in appetite with a qualified health professional so that he/she can rule out medical or pharmacological causes to overeating.

**Psychological triggers**

While the physiological triggers are relatively easy to manage, the psychological triggers are much more difficult to overcome. These triggers are grounded in deeply held beliefs about food and eating, as well as firmly established learned responses to various situations and emotional states.

**“Good food-bad food” mentality:** When you think of “good foods,” what foods come to mind? Perhaps you think of vegetables, fruits, and very lean protein-rich foods. What about “bad foods?” Everything with fat in it, right? (fried foods, pizza, chips, cookies, and chocolate...) Or maybe it’s anything with too many carbs in it (like bread, pasta, and potatoes). Where did these “good food-bad food” labels come from? Perhaps they came from a recent diet book you read, or from a friend, or from what your parents always told you while you were growing up. It’s true that some foods have a

stronger nutritional profile than other foods, but no food is inherently “good” or “bad.” It’s your overall diet that may be good or bad based on how you balance your food choices throughout the day.

For instance, a diet which consists of only fruits and vegetables is NOT a good diet. The problem is the lack of balance. Fruits and vegetables are excellent sources of fiber, vitamins A and C, folate, and potassium. But, they lack protein, many of the B vitamins, vitamins E and D, calcium, iron, zinc, and the essential fatty acids. Similarly, a diet which consists of only high fat, fast food “value meals” three times a day is not a good diet. This diet would be too high in saturated fat and sodium and terribly lacking in fiber as well as many other important nutrients. On the other hand, if you had one high fat fast food meal at lunch and balanced it out with a high fiber, low fat breakfast and dinner, your overall eating plan would look quite good.

There are two problems with labeling foods in such “black or white” categories. First, there’s no flexibility. It’s all or nothing! “If I eat one piece of cheesecake, I’m a complete failure and I’ve completely blown my diet. So I might as well eat the entire cheesecake now and start over tomorrow.” Second, there’s too much restriction. And, whenever something is off limits or forbidden, we tend to want it more. For instance, children whose parents strictly prohibit them from eating sweets and treats are much more likely to binge on these foods when they are away from their parents (like when they start college for the first time).

#### **Learned responses to uncomfortable feelings:**

Throughout our life, we are conditioned to turn to food for security, comfort, and pleasure. As babies, the most powerful comforter when we were distressed was our mother’s milk. As toddlers, we were offered cookies and milk when we fell in the playground and got hurt.

Throughout our school years, we were rewarded with sweet treats when we brought home good grades and punished for bad behavior by being sent to our rooms without dessert.

It’s little wonder that as college students, food becomes a tranquilizer when we’re anxious and stressed out, a mood elevator when we’re depressed, a comforter when we’re lonely, a reward when we’ve had a hard day, and an entertainer when we are bored. We learn to cope with uncomfortable feelings by stuffing them all down with food. Like alcohol and drugs, food becomes a temporary escape.



## REMEMBER THE 5 D'S

**DELAY** your response so you can figure out what exactly is tempting you to binge.

**DETERMINE** what's going on. Ask yourself, "Why is my desire to eat so high right now? Am I physically hungry? If not, "what do I really want or need?"

**DISTRACT** yourself for 10 minutes (WAIT).

**DISTANCE** yourself, physically, from the temptation.

**DECIDE** how you will handle it.

- If you're tired, take a nap. If you're feeling lonely, call a friend. If you're feeling anxious, go for a walk or take a bubble bath.
- If you're having a specific food craving, identify what you really want, go get a single portion, and enjoy it without guilt!