



Exploring Emotional Eating



What is Emotional Eating?

Emotional eating is often perceived as a coping tool people use to handle daily life.

It takes place when people eat in response to their emotions/moods – usually negative ones such as anxiety, moderate depression/sadness (severe depression can result in weight loss), feeling a lack of control, stress, anger, loneliness and boredom. Sometimes emotional eating occurs as a result of positive moods, such as being extremely happy, but this is not as common.

Some researchers, such as Thayer¹ suggest that the negative emotions that lead to emotional eating are often associated with a low level of energy and a high level of tension. Thus, people tend to eat when they experience these negative emotions, to try to change their mood state (e.g. to increase energy to lift their mood, or calm down to reduce tension when feeling stressed or anxious). Eating certain foods becomes associated with feeling comforted, breaking boredom and reducing anxiety, however, this feeling state is only temporary and can lead to overeating or further negative emotions.

Research shows that restrictive dieters experiencing negative moods actually EAT MORE! This is because they're under so much tension when they are surrounded by food (e.g. at a social function). This tense feeling thus increases the need to self regulate with food and overeat! This is why the *Refresh Your Life* program suggests various ways to regulate the tense/tired state - without using/abusing food.

Research shows that restrictive dieters experiencing negative moods actually EAT MORE! This is because they're under so much tension when they are surrounded by food (e.g. at a social function). This tense feeling thus increases the need to self regulate with food and overeat! This is why the *Refresh Your Life* program suggests various ways to regulate the tense/tired state - without using/abusing food.

Tell tale signs to recognize Emotional Eating

The Eating Disorders Anonymous organization has developed a list of signs they say can be seen in people who emotionally eat – of course they don't all apply to every person, however, they give you something to think about (www.eatingdisordersanonymous.org):

- Eating little in public
- Depressed mood
- Obsessive thoughts about food
- Using food as a reward or punishment
- Fluctuations in weight
- Labeling food as "good" or "bad"
- Hiding evidence of having eaten
- Preoccupation with body image
- Intense fear of anger and conflict
- Restricting activities due to embarrassment about weight and/or eating habits

Reference:

Thayer, R.E. (2001). *Calm Energy. How people regulate mood with food and exercise*. Oxford University Press, New York.

Written October 2006