



Emotions and Food



Emotions and food

People often associate a tremendous amount of emotion to food. Celebrations are often based entirely on food, like chocolate at Easter, and pudding at Christmas. The flip side of this is the negative emotions we attach to food. If your emotions are positive you are more likely to be motivated to stick to your goals, however, if your emotions are negative you're more likely to take on a 'defeatist' response and binge eat. Usually what occurs in this state is that you convince yourself that there is no point in trying, because you've given up now (the "all or nothing" thinking). These are the times that people are most vulnerable.

The pattern of overeating to soothe one's moods can start in childhood. Children learn to associate having fun eating with their friends at parties and this association continues into adulthood social gatherings and work functions. Parents can also reinforce this behaviour by using a food as a positive reinforcement to soothe upset children or reward being behaviour. Thus perpetuating the connection between food and mood. Further, adults use/abuse food as a way of feeling in control of something, or distracting them from thinking about negative experiences or events, but again this distraction and feeling of control is only temporary. The reverse happens with people with eating disorders such as anorexia – people try to control their lives, by controlling how much they consume. Again, the mind plays a big part, so controlling this part of your life, is essential to living a health and happy life.

Negative emotions and food

Although it's necessary to be aware of overeating during happy occasions, it is far more important to focus on avoiding the negative feelings one associates with food during sad times. It's more common to 'indulge' when alone and depressed than it is when happy and surrounded by other people¹. This behaviour often leads to a defeatist 'overeating' response (e.g. eating the whole cake instead of just having a slice), as one becomes convinced that this little 'slip' indicates a complete failure to adhere to healthy eating.

The 'defeatist response' is not just associated with getting into shape. People experience it in every day life, at work, in their relationships, or when trying to develop a new skill. The following case study highlights a response to having a defeatist attitude.

Case Study: Mary (aged 27)

Mary was completing the first year of her psychology degree. She had worked diligently on her core projects, which were a compulsory component of the course to pass. It meant a great deal to her to do well. At High School she was a straight 'A' student at the top of her class, however, at University the bar was much higher and she began to achieve poor grades. She tried everything she could to do well on her own, but no matter how much she studied, she couldn't seem to achieve the grades she was accustomed to. Finally she became so depressed she started to convince herself that she wasn't going to pass the year at all. She even convinced herself she wasn't intelligent and had somehow fluked the past 12 years of High School.

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Mary's initial problem was she wasn't aware of the messages she was sending herself. Finally, she began speaking to a counsellor who helped her to realise the power of positive thinking. She began to realize that she was actually creating a self-fulfilling prophesy by convincing herself she couldn't achieve the success she really believed she deserved. After one of her sessions with the counsellor, she was asked to go home and write out some positive statements to repeat to herself every time she felt sad about her grades and felt as though she wasn't good enough.

The types of positive statement Mary wrote were as follows:

- *I know that I am an intelligent person*
- *I know that if I persevere I will succeed*
- *I believe I have a place at this University because I deserve it*
- *I have always achieved success in the past with hard work and perseverance*
- *If I obtain a bad mark it does not mean I'm stupid, I just need to evaluate my study methods*
- *If I need additional assistance there is nothing wrong with asking. Many people have tutors*

It took courage to face the reality of Mary's situation. She had to swallow her pride and accept that she needed help. She decided to take on additional tutoring classes and when she did, it was pointed out to her that she was achieving poor results because she was applying the writing disciplines of other subjects to psychology that has a very unique writing styles and rules. It took a bit of work, but her positive thinking helped her more than anything else could have at the time. She learnt the hard way that she had to identify the association between her emotions and the negative messages she was sending herself.

Prior to challenging her thoughts Mary had clearly developed a 'defeatist attitude'. She was ready to give up. It is this 'defeatist attitude' that maintains ones connections between emotions and food. In this state you can easily convince yourself that there is no point in trying. That you may as well eat the whole cake, or stop eating all together until your depression subsides, at which point you 'pig out' when the hunger starts to hit.

To avoid/break the negative connection between emotions and food why not write down some positive messages you can tell yourself when you feel like eating because you're depressed or bored. Then place them somewhere in your kitchen where you will be reminded of your ability to control your eating patterns. Here are a few examples below:

- *I know that I can only have one piece of cake, or one row of biscuits to satisfy my cravings*
- *If I'm bored, I'm better off having a drink 1st to see if it settles my cravings*
- *If I binge now, I'll feel even worse later*
- *Eating chocolate will not make me happier*
- *I have the strength to know when I've had enough*

Reference:

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

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