

Minimizing Emotional Eating in the Time of the Pandemic

Dina Goldstein Silverman, Ph.D.

The COVID-19 pandemic has left most Americans reeling, struggling with anxiety, sadness, fear and apprehensive anticipation of the coming days. The never-ending stream of sensationalized bad news, between the dire predictions of doom and gloom to the harrowing footage from the epicenters of the disease, only serve to worsen the understandable worries that everyone experiences, and whether an essential worker on the front lines or a conscientious citizen sheltering in place, all of us are tapping into every resource to cope with the distress of this crisis. One of the coping skills that most people lean on, is indulging in comfort food and sweet snacks to self-medicate for fear and worry. Emotional eating is a coping skill that none of us are immune from, and it is not always maladaptive. In every culture, we eat to celebrate, and we eat to mourn. We mark milestones with meals, and we greet holidays with specific dishes. From borscht to lasagna and from palak paneer to macaroni and cheese and everything in between, we communicate our pride in our cultural, religious and ethnic heritage, our love for our family and friends and our joy at the change of the seasons with food! However, in a time of crisis, emotional eating can take center stage as a very unhealthy coping skill, one that leads us down the pathway of unnecessary weight gain and obesity. Here are some tools that everyone can use to mitigate emotional eating:

- 1) This may seem counterintuitive but **allow yourself a small indulgence daily**. Categorical, black and white thinking, such as “I will not give in to temptation”, or “I will stay away from all triggering foods”, is going to set you up to fail. That, in turn, will only lead to negative, self-critical and shaming thoughts that will undermine your self-esteem and make it harder for you to cope. Instead, focus on a single indulgence that you would like, whether it is a cookie or Nutella spread on a slice of toast or a flavorful bowl of stew. If you allow yourself an indulgence, you can also look forward to it and frame it as part of your self-care after a long and exhausting day.
- 2) **Eat mindfully**. Once you have your indulgence picked out, don’t scarf it down, eat it on the run or whilst staring at the TV (or tablet or phone or computer screen). Wash your hands, sit in a comfortable seat, set a place setting out for yourself and truly savor your treat. Focus on the texture of it and the flavor. Allow your mind to drift to the pleasant memories you may have associated with this treat, whether it is making it with your children or eating the treat previously in happier times. Notice how it feels on your tongue and pay attention to the way that you feel as you enjoy every scrumptious bite.
- 3) **Once you are done, you are done**. Shift your attention to something else. Having appreciated your treat, you can now focus on the next task at hand and can look forward to another indulgence tomorrow.
- 4) **Avoid triggering foods and if you cannot avoid them, stick to a serving size**. If there are some foods that you simply cannot stop eating once you have begun, limit your access to them. Whilst we are all sheltering in place, you cannot simply run out to the

store and grab that much desired item, so your access to a triggering item is already limited. However, if you have that food in the home, try to put it out of easy reach, such as a separate container stored in the garage or basement or attic rather than the pantry, or pre-portion that food in its serving size to limit overeating. If you are partial to peanut butter, dole out serving sizes in small containers and pair it with apple slices, carrots or pretzels for a balanced snack. Cannot resist baked goods? Slice them and store them in separate zippered plastic baggies.

- 5) **Eat without shame in full view of others and use mealtimes to connect with one another.** Remember that old childhood rhyme, “secrets, secrets are no fun, they can even hurt someone?” Same is true for eating in secret. Fellowship with family is especially important in a trying time, so when you sit down to eat, embrace healthy, balanced meals in full view of your loved ones. If you are normally on the run between work and your children’s activities, use this time to slow down, turn off the TV and enjoy leisurely meals with your family. If you would normally connect with your older family members, or, if you are used to dining out with neighbors and friends, schedule virtual dinners and brunches with them, put the tablet or phone in the middle of the table and enjoy the banter, laughter and emotional intimacy of breaking bread with the people you cherish.
- 6) **Plan and prepare meals together with your family.** The stress of meal-planning and prepping often falls on the shoulders of the designated cook in the family. It can feel especially burdensome for those family members who are able to work from home and become responsible for preparing, serving and tidying up after every meal. Engage your children in helping you prepare meals (nothing like a great Science and Math lesson in measuring ingredients, mixing, stirring and sautéing, under parental supervision!) Give younger children an opportunity to develop mastery and self-efficacy by helping set the table or by putting dirty dishes in the sink. Make older children and teenagers feel more involved by getting their input on what meals they would like to prepare and allow them to take charge of preparing meals for the family on certain days. Cooking is an essential life skill that can also be a bonding experience and a source of accomplishment and pride!
- 7) **Plan for nighttime.** Many emotional eaters find that they struggle at night, when they can slow down from a long day of work, and when they sit down to relax. Recognize your environmental cues – is it that you are tempted to snack when you sit down to watch TV at night? Is it a particular comfy spot on the couch or a certain TV show that makes you want to go poke around the pantry and fridge? Perhaps, instead of plopping down on the sofa to watch TV at night, you can take a short walk around the block after dinner to clear your head. Or, if you have exercise equipment in your home, could you put it in front of the TV, so that instead of sitting on the couch, you can ride a stationary bicycle or walk on a treadmill? Some people find that they snack to stay awake so that they can remain up to watch their favorite shows. This is a great opportunity to listen to your body’s cues. If you are having a hard time keeping your eyes open, go to bed. You may

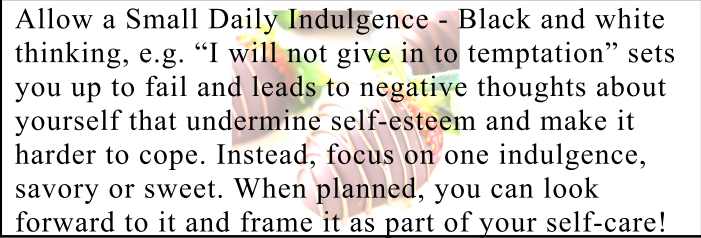
feel more rested and more energetic the next day since you have gotten more sleep, and we know from research that you are less likely to overeat and more likely to make healthier food choices when you are well-rested and not sleep deprived.

- 8) **Eat when you are hungry and stop when you are full.** It sounds easier said than done, but if you have the skills to get to work on time, attend appointments in a timely fashion and get up at the same time each day, you already have all the requisite skills you need to monitor your eating schedule. Try to eat your meals around the same time each day. When you feel like a snack, ask yourself how long has it been since your last meal? If you are truly hungry, ask yourself what is the most nutritious choice that you can make for yourself at that moment. If you have had your last meal just a couple of hours ago, chances are that you are not truly hungry but perhaps, sad, anxious or avoidant, procrastinating on a work project or another onerous task. Try to bring yourself to the present moment and go to the source of your discomfort. If you are fearful, vent to a loved one or a friend. If you are sad, allow yourself to feel the sadness, normalize how you feel (if this is not the time to feel sad, I don't know what is), and remind yourself that right now, you are well, and that some day soon, you will feel more contented and less sad. Look at pictures of people that you love or photos of scenery of your favorite places. If you are a person of faith, lean on prayer. If you enjoy meditation, find a meditation that you can do. Slow your breathing and sit with your own feelings for a few minutes. You may find that the urge to snack has passed.
- 9) **Drink water.** Many times, we forget that thirst can feel like hunger, and most of us do not drink enough water during the day. Keep a water bottle close by and sip throughout the day. Stay away from sodas and juices and other sugary drinks, but if plain water bores you, flavor it with a squirt of lemon or a slice of strawberry. Use drinking water as a mindfulness experience – sip it slowly, allow yourself to feel its coolness streaming down your throat, feel the cool surface of the bottle between your hands. You are less likely to overeat if you are not thirsty, and you will feel more energy, too!
- 10) **Remember that a life well-lived is about balance!** If you fall off the wagon and find yourself doing too much noshing, be kind to yourself, especially now. This is a time of unprecedented stress, and everyone's resolves are being tested daily. Dealing with trauma is a long game; it is impossible for everyone to be perfectly poised, present and polite at all times and with all people. We will all lose our temper, burst into tears or eat a little too much on occasion. Just as you would apologize to your spouse or partner if you snapped and raised your voice, use the next moment as an opportunity to make a healthier choice. Rather than beating yourself up, simply get up and get back in the saddle. The next meal is an opportunity to make a healthy choice and move forward.

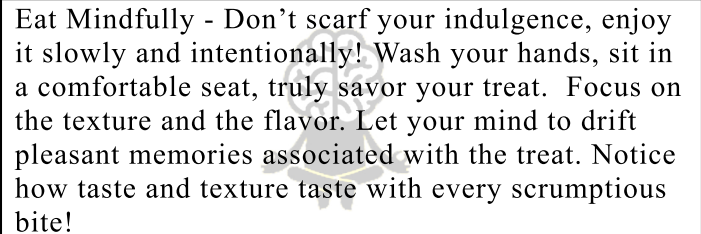
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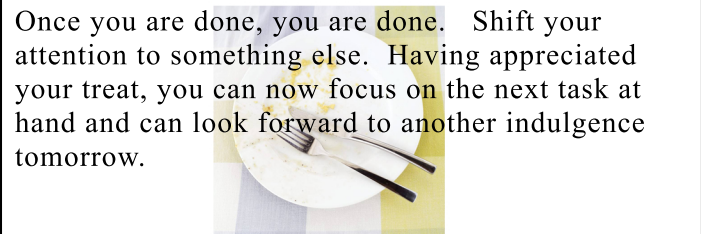
The COVID-19 pandemic has left most Americans reeling, struggling with anxiety, sadness, fear and apprehensive anticipation of the coming days. In the face of this, all of us are tapping into every resource to cope with the distress of this crisis. One of the coping skills that most people lean on, is indulging in comfort food and sweet snacks to self-medicate for fear and worry. Emotional eating is a coping skill that none of us are immune from, and it is not always maladaptive. In every culture, we eat to celebrate, to mourn, to mark milestones, and to celebrate holidays. However, in a time of crisis, emotional eating can take center stage as a very unhealthy coping skill, one that leads us down the pathway of unnecessary weight gain and obesity. Below are 10 tools that everyone can use to mitigate emotional eating.



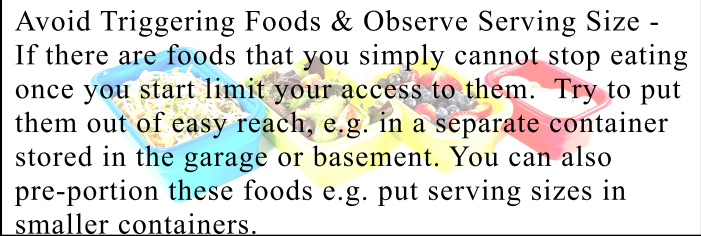
Allow a Small Daily Indulgence - Black and white thinking, e.g. “I will not give in to temptation” sets you up to fail and leads to negative thoughts about yourself that undermine self-esteem and make it harder to cope. Instead, focus on one indulgence, savory or sweet. When planned, you can look forward to it and frame it as part of your self-care!



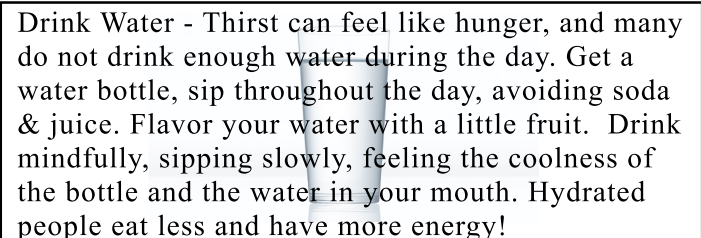
Eat Mindfully - Don’t scarf your indulgence, enjoy it slowly and intentionally! Wash your hands, sit in a comfortable seat, truly savor your treat. Focus on the texture and the flavor. Let your mind drift to pleasant memories associated with the treat. Notice how taste and texture taste with every scrumptious bite!



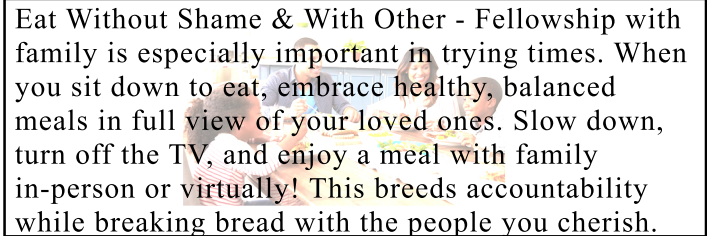
Once you are done, you are done. Shift your attention to something else. Having appreciated your treat, you can now focus on the next task at hand and can look forward to another indulgence tomorrow.



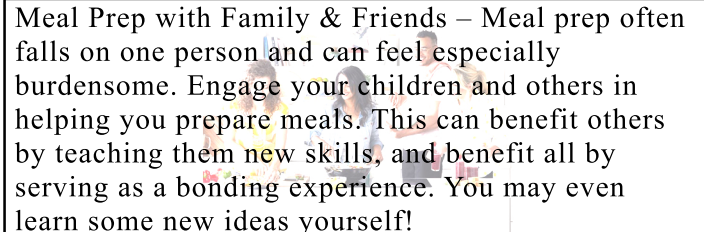
Avoid Triggering Foods & Observe Serving Size - If there are foods that you simply cannot stop eating once you start limit your access to them. Try to put them out of easy reach, e.g. in a separate container stored in the garage or basement. You can also pre-portion these foods e.g. put serving sizes in smaller containers.



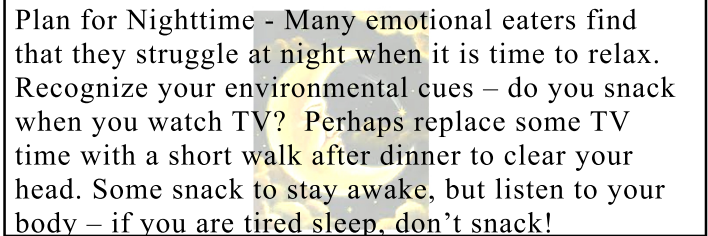
Drink Water - Thirst can feel like hunger, and many do not drink enough water during the day. Get a water bottle, sip throughout the day, avoiding soda & juice. Flavor your water with a little fruit. Drink mindfully, sipping slowly, feeling the coolness of the bottle and the water in your mouth. Hydrated people eat less and have more energy!



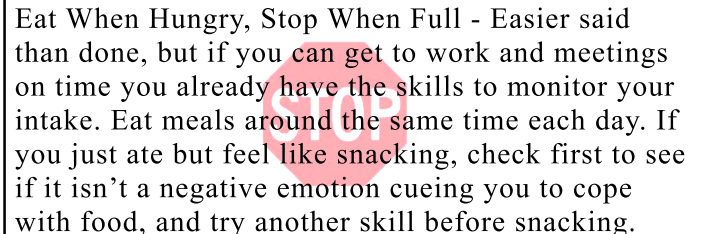
Eat Without Shame & With Other - Fellowship with family is especially important in trying times. When you sit down to eat, embrace healthy, balanced meals in full view of your loved ones. Slow down, turn off the TV, and enjoy a meal with family in-person or virtually! This breeds accountability while breaking bread with the people you cherish.



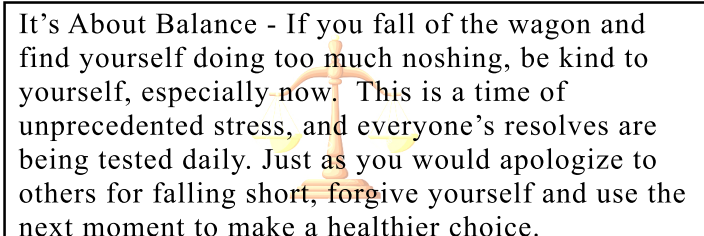
Meal Prep with Family & Friends – Meal prep often falls on one person and can feel especially burdensome. Engage your children and others in helping you prepare meals. This can benefit others by teaching them new skills, and benefit all by serving as a bonding experience. You may even learn some new ideas yourself!



Plan for Nighttime - Many emotional eaters find that they struggle at night when it is time to relax. Recognize your environmental cues – do you snack when you watch TV? Perhaps replace some TV time with a short walk after dinner to clear your head. Some snack to stay awake, but listen to your body – if you are tired sleep, don’t snack!



Eat When Hungry, Stop When Full - Easier said than done, but if you can get to work and meetings on time you already have the skills to monitor your intake. Eat meals around the same time each day. If you just ate but feel like snacking, check first to see if it isn’t a negative emotion cueing you to cope with food, and try another skill before snacking.



It’s About Balance - If you fall off the wagon and find yourself doing too much noshing, be kind to yourself, especially now. This is a time of unprecedented stress, and everyone’s resolves are being tested daily. Just as you would apologize to others for falling short, forgive yourself and use the next moment to make a healthier choice.