

Let's talk about Emotional Eating

We all know that scoffing an extra bar of chocolate or packet of biscuits isn't going to solve that problem with our boss or our partner. Why then do we keep using food in a futile attempt to overcome our emotional problems? We know that after five minutes or so we will feel doubly bad. Firstly, we haven't resolved our issues and secondly, now we have loaded our system with a whole lot of extra calories, sugars, and fats that we didn't need in the first place. Knowing better doesn't automatically mean that we can change our life-long habits; in fact, in trying to change that behaviour I believe we're really up against it.

There are good reasons for emotional eating. In first instance emotional eating makes us feel better in minutes. We all have this hard-wired response in our brain: the primitive part of our brain feels immediately calmed by food (and even a drink of water) because it is reassured that we will live another day. This part of the brain is all about our safety and the survival. Other ways in which we create that primal sense of safety are touch and relationship. The key is that we first establish a sense of safety so that the other parts of our brain can function well. Another important factor is that one of the first synapses we make as newly born babies is mother equals food equals love. This is then strongly reinforced by each time we are fed. No wonder then that emotional eating is such a global phenomenon.

Here's an example to illustrate the point. Let's imagine a woman who books a ticket to travel overseas for a family visit. A few weeks later she hears on the radio about the Malaysian Airlines flight being shot out of the sky. Her first reaction is to get something to eat, despite just having had lunch. She inhales a bar of chocolate and maybe realised that it is fear that triggered this response. Once she realises that, she can deal with her feelings in a more appropriate way.

Now that we know why we do it, the next point is, how can we change this behaviour? How can we create a new habit? There are a number of things we can do. The first aim is to slow down that primitive response and then figure out what the feeling is. Once we know what it is that has triggered this response we can deal with the feeling and then decide whether we need food at all at this point in time. You could try having a sip of water, followed by a deep breath, and give yourself about 5 minutes to reflect on what is going on emotionally. There are acupuncture points that can calm us down and there are strategies we can develop.

For some people emotional eating is not much of a problem. But for those who struggle with it, make sure you don't give yourself a hard time over it: that's yet another way to make you feel bad. No positive changes are made from a bad feeling. It really does take time and concerted effort to create a healthier habit.