



EMOTIONAL EATING

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CULTIVATING
Wellness

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I hold a Bachelor of Health Science majoring in Naturopathy, Herbal Medicine and Nutritional Medicine; and a Masters of Human Nutrition.

During my studies, I was honoured to be the recipient of several scholarships. I have also been a contributing author to a well-known evidence-based herbal and nutritional textbook ('Herbs and Natural Supplements – An Evidence-Based Guide' by Lesley Braun and Marc Cohen).

I'm an accredited member of the Australian Natural Therapists Association (ANTA).

I was born in Darwin and raised in central Queensland. Growing up, my incredible parents ran their own business, which was principally based on Regenerative Farming; and focused on educating farmers on how to increase the health of their soil, pastures and animals using more holistic models. I suspect this was what led me down the path of Naturopathy, as the principles of Natural medicine mirror many of those which underpin Regenerative Farming.

After school, I kept my inner gypsy very happy by travelling around and exploring the world before settling in Melbourne to study. After graduating in 2011, my husband and I moved back to sunny Queensland where I owned and operated a successful multi-modality wellness clinic, Gladstone Holistic Health; and in late 2015, I became a Mum (my proudest achievement yet!) and started a new business, Cultivating Wellness.

As a practicing Naturopath, Nutritionist and Herbalist; I enjoy the challenges of clinical practice and take clients Australia wide. I absolutely *love* sharing my interests,

knowledge and passion with others! I regularly host workshops; have been lucky enough to be invited to speak at many local and regional events; and have done numerous segments on ABC radio (Western Queensland).

I'm also the nutrition consultant (aka the foodie chick!) for Off the Track Training, a global access organisation focused on fitness, food and motivation designed to ensure long term sustainable health and well-being for people in isolation (or anywhere for that matter) whether they are in rural outback Australia or inner city suburbs.

I really am in awe of the human body and our capacity to both heal and grow. I am also endlessly amazed by our biochemistry and the way in which we respond to our environment, the food we eat and the emotions we experience.

My Philosophy

My philosophy around food is based on current knowledge, traditional wisdom, and above all else, common sense. I believe in quality over quantity; the importance of balance; and that how you eat is just as important as what you eat. I also believe that food is one of life's greatest pleasures, it's part of our cultural heritage and identity. For these reasons, it should be enjoyed, not feared.

To me, healthy food is REAL food. This means it's had a recent connection to the earth. It's either lived or has been grown outside. It spoils. It does not need to be fortified or altered in any way, it's healthy in its whole form.

Finally, I truly believe that nutrition is the most basic and fundamental tool for the prevention of chronic disease, and one of the strongest therapies in the maintenance of well-being. Thanks for checking out what gives me joy, hopefully it's contagious!

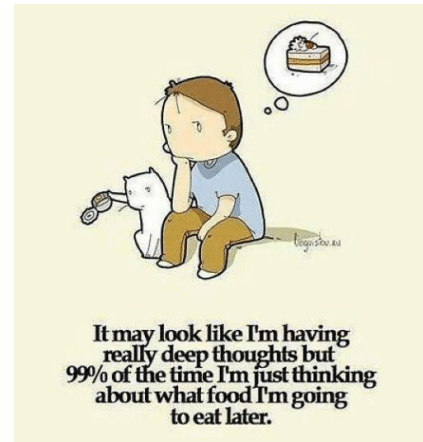
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Emotional Eating

When I was doing the research for this presentation I stumbled across this cartoon and it certainly rings true for me. I know it's probably true for many of you guys as well because sometimes we can be sitting down to a beautiful breakfast and we're thinking about what we're going to have for snack, lunch, or dinner, or the weekend to come. We do need to stop and ask ourselves occasionally, are we consuming food or is food actually consuming us a little too much?



Defining Emotional Eating

Emotional eating is defined as;

"When we turn to food, whether it be consciously or subconsciously, when we're facing a difficult problem, when we're feeling stressed, or when we're feeling worried"

This is why emotional eating – it's often referred to comfort eating, stress eating, or even boredom eating.

It's very different to physical hunger. One strategy I recommend is before you eat, ask yourself how physically hungry are you on a scale of 1 to 10? How emotionally hungry are you on a scale of 1 to 10?

Even if you're not really sure what the answers are to those questions, just by asking yourself those questions it brings what might have been maybe an unconscious decision to eat something mindlessly or emotionally, to your conscious mind.

Considering we make just over 200 food based decisions a day, and roughly 80% of those are mindless decisions, becoming more mindful about what you're eating and being more present is the first step for many people.

You're Not Alone

Last year a survey revealed that around 83% of Australians that are overweight and obese struggled with emotional eating.

When it comes to weight loss, please remember that our relationship to food is complex. What that means is we really need to be moving away from any overly simplistic message that's often drilled into people who want to lose weight, which is to "eat less and exercise more".

The reason we want to move away from that message is because there is a whole brain science behind what drives people to eat. There is a psychology to the relationship we have to food.

Drivers of Emotional Eating

Although we're all very different and the research is still emerging, here are a few possible causes to take into consideration.

Firstly, *inadequate affect regulation*. In other words, the belief that food will make your negative feelings go away, or at least temporarily. This might be a driver for you if you're the type of person that looks for comfort foods when you've received

upsetting news, or you might get stuck into some ice cream after a stressful day at work!

Secondly, *escape*. In the context of emotional eating this relates to using food as a distraction from negative or even unengaging or boring situations. For example, rather than dealing with that pile of paperwork that you might have to get through, you distract yourself and eat something or have another snack.

Thirdly we've got *restraint*. This is a possible driver for those that are on restricted diets or very restrictive eating. After all, the natural instinct for someone that feels very restricted is to seek freedom. In this case, seeking freedom might be through food. This is one of the reasons why controlled and restricted low calorie dieting isn't just everyone's cup of tea.

Fourthly, *conditioning*. I'll get to this really soon in more depth. This is a driver for people who have been controlled or raised to use food as an emotional regulator. It often begins really early in childhood and in this case emotionally eating might be more habitual than anything else.

Finally, we've got *biochemistry* and *neuroprogramming*. This speaks to the concept that we have these wide high genetic mechanisms that powerfully influence our brain. That can sometimes be in a way that's a little bit hard to control by your conscious mind. I'll be talking more about that shortly.

I also want to mention that emotional eating can be a precursor to eating disorders, which are very serious conditions. It's really important to seek extra help from someone who is really well trained in this area, like a psychologist, if you feel you need more emotional support.

House versus Home

When you think about where you live, for so many people it is much more than just shelter. Your house is also your home. Like the physical support that food gives your body to have good bone health, good cellular function, good organ health, good structure, your house needs to be structurally strong and sound. We know that. We also know that your house needs to be a place where happy memories are made, where you feel safe and secure, where you can grow emotionally resilient. Food needs to do these things for us as well.

For example, you can have a great diet or a structurally sound house, but you can be uncomfortable or unhappy not fostering a healthy relationship with food, just like you can own a beautiful house but it doesn't feel like home, or that beautiful house comes with negative memories.

I am bringing this to your attention because I really want to take the stigma out of emotional eating. There's nothing wrong with associating food with emotions, it's very normal, it's very natural. We just want you to be making sure that all of this is done in positive ways, not negative ones.

Breastfeeding = comfort and nourishment

If you think about it, for many of us, the very first food that we have also offers comfort and love. We're not only building a strong house with the incredible nutrient from breast milk, we're bonding with the mother. We're feeling confident, we're feeling safe, we're feeling secure and content. This is a perfect example of how from the very first few minutes of being in this world we crave the physical and emotional nourishment to be truly satisfied.



What happens then when we first begin to introduce solids?

There has been some really interesting studies done on concept of conditioning, or using food as a reward after we start to eat solids. We know that kids prefer the foods that are higher in both fat and sugar if their parents use food to regulate their child's emotions, if they use food as a reward, if they pressure their child to eat more, or if they place too much restriction on unhealthy food.

We also know that for the children who prefer these high fat, high sugar foods less, their parents made healthy foods more available to them in the home, they eat healthy foods themselves, and they explain why healthy foods should be consumed.

I'll give you an example of conditioning. When my niece was about 3 years old, I was at the beach with my sister. We were playing happily and my niece hit her toe and hurt her toe. It started bleeding. My niece got really upset. My sister put her in the car straight away and drove her home. On the way home my little niece was really upset, really devastated, crying all the way home, and my sister said, *"It's alright sweetie, when we get home, Mummy will make it all better."* When they got home my sister put my niece on a chair, and went and got a Band-Aid and started to clean up the wound whilst at the same time gave her some chocolate and said, *"Shh... this is going to make it all better. It's all going to be okay."*

My niece was still crying, and after she ate the chocolate she looked up at my sister with utter confusion on her face and she said, *"Mummy, my toe still hurts!"*

She was so confused about why when her Mum said this is going to take the pain away she still had pain. She actually believed it would physically remove her pain.

Now, my sister was clearly offering her chocolate from a place of love and kindness. There's nothing wrong with that. However, it is this kind of conditioning that can teach kids to use food as an emotional regulator. My niece will never remember this particular situation, but subconsciously she is making associations over time. If this is done repeatedly, these associations, which is chocolate equals comfort and comfort equals pain relief, will develop into strong associations.

Our Primal Brain

Let's move on and look more at how the brain works, particularly from an ancestral perspective. A neuroscientist called Dr. Stephan Guyenet has recently published a report called *The Hungry Brain: Understanding the Instincts that Make Us Overeat*. He goes on to explain that there is a reason why our impulses work the way they do.

The impulse is generally that they were the things that supported the survival of our ancestors. Energy is a great example of that. Energy is critical to survival. Calories are critical to reproduction and survival. The brain is really very deeply and carefully wired to behave in certain ways with respect to energy intake.

In an environment where food scarcity was the biggest problem, calories and the drive to consume foods rich in calories from an evolutionary perspective really gave us a survival advantage. Historically, gorging ourselves on calorie rich foods was actually a very positive thing to do (because the next meal wasn't a sure thing!). It wasn't looked at as a negative act. However, in today's era, where energy rich, nutrient poor foods are virtually everywhere, it really is a prescription for a possible metabolic disaster.

Not only that, many of the foods we are now surrounded with are actually engineered by food scientists to leave you wanting more. The food industry is very clever at designing its foods to trigger these known motivational circuits in the brain. That's what's most profitable for them.

Overcoming Emotional Eating – Strategies

Make your meals delicious and balanced.

Deliciousness matters quite a lot. Our brain is hardwired to look for certain properties in food, especially when it comes to food macronutrients like starch, sugar, fat, and protein. We have sensors in our mouth and in our small intestine that detect the chemical property and the volume of what you give it. It sends all that information back up to the brain. If your brain gets the message that a particular food is an outstanding source of fat, carbs, and protein, you get a spike in dopamine, which means you're going to be really motivated to eat that food over and over again. Even the smell and the sight of that particular food will be really seductive and motivating for you.

Based on the physical properties of food, if the brain decides that it's really valuable because it has these large quantities or balanced quantities of proteins, carbs, and fat at once, it also has this way of kind of sweeping aside your natural vitamins intake, which means you can overeat that food more easily. It can even increase your body fat set points to facilitate the intake of that food which it uses so valuable.

The issue that we face is that from an evolutionary perspective, we were able to access these highly motivating foods, although quite rare to actually find something that was so balanced and so outstanding. It wasn't a bad thing to be able to overeat those particular foods from an ancestral perspective. Now we are living in an environment, as I mentioned earlier, where we've got the

wrong kinds of these macronutrients and sweet spot foods all around us.

Take pizza. It's a perfect example of a food that contains high levels of fat, protein, and carbohydrate, which is why it's so addictive. Studies have shown it even beats chocolate and chips for its addictive factor.

So how do you seduce your brain by using whole foods rather than pizza?

The goal is to ensure that each main meal, and even snacks if we need them, contains a palm sized portion of proteins, a rainbow of plants, and some nourishing fats. Not only will this help with blood sugar regulation and satiety, both of which will reduce cravings in their own right, it will send that really important message to your brain that this meal is really outstanding. That then helps with dopamine spike which triggers that motivation circuit, which really helps us want to eat that particular healthy meal again.



In my experience, many people get this balance fairly right at dinner. They eat variations of meat and tree veg, but really struggle to get this balance achieved at breakfast and lunch. What I recommend is you come up with two or three breakfast options that check the boxes using whole foods that you enjoy. For me, breakfast is generally either a balanced – maybe an egg

based dish, omelet or scrambled eggs or something, something like a homemade granola with yoghurt.

Meal plan if you need to. Many of my clients have found meal planning to be really helpful for them. If you're not already, I'd suggest you start having leftovers for lunch. Make it easy for yourself, just start cooking more at night, especially if you're really nailing the fats, proteins, and carbs at nighttime.

Nuts and dairy contain all three of these macronutrients, which makes them excellent nourishing choices for snacks. It's also a good idea to soak or dehydrate your nuts before you eat them and eat a variety of nuts. As for dairy, cultured and fermented dairy is always best. Things like natural greek yogurt, live cultured cheeses, and labneh.

Modify your environment

Remember that your brain is highly reactive to the cues in your personal environment. This is why the food industry spends billions of dollars on food advertising. They know it works. They know that food cues going in through your eyeballs and into your brain are going to make you buy more and eat more of their food. Modifying your environment is a very powerful way for you to actually either support or undermine your own eating goals.

It does two things. Firstly, it means it's not only physically harder for you to eat those foods because it's so much harder to access them, it also (and perhaps more powerfully) removes the visual cues and minimizes that motivational and emotional drive to eat

that food. Essentially you might feel the same level of cravings when those foods aren't around you.

Make it easy for yourself. Make your personal environment extremely supportive of your goals and fill it up with the good stuff. This may not happen overnight. The first thing to do is to identify the foods which have very little or no nutritional value that you still buy, whether it be soft drinks or chips or lollies.



The second step is to not buy them. Exhibiting a bit of self-control in the supermarket could save you *lots* of energy trying to resist temptation later on.

The third step is to stock up your pantry, fridge, and freezer with lots of healthy, nourishing, tasty foods that you enjoy. If you don't enjoy brussels sprouts, don't buy them. If you do enjoy carrots, buy twice as much. Just make sure you've got plenty of healthy options around you at home.

Find healthy 'soul foods'

Some of my favorite foods include real peanut butter, oysters, pea and ham soup, and mango. Each of these foods for me, you can see here, carries really positive memories and emotion. I'm bringing that to your attention because another strategy is to think about what foods which are nutrient dense and healthy that you associate a positive memory or positive emotion to. This is what I call soul food.

What I suggest is you come up with a list of healthy foods you really enjoy. Make sure you've got a few of those options within your home environment on standby for whenever you need them.

If you can't think of any healthy foods that you actually crave, start creating really fun and happy memories with healthy foods. Next time it's your birthday or celebration, make something healthy and enjoy it with loved ones. It might seem like a really small step but it's the small steps that make the difference for that long term change.

This kind of ties in with what I've previously suggested, to increase the "deliciousness" and yum factor of your diet! I see so many people who are so bored with eating their "healthy" diet. We have all these whole foods available to us and often we don't utilize them. Many people don't spend enough time, energy, affect into making our food tastier so we enjoy food more. It's not a priority, when perhaps it should be?

When you make your food tastier, you're home cooked food tastier, you are less likely to be tempted by other foods. It's really important. Our body needs it, our body craves that yum factor. What I encourage you to do, if you really enjoy for example, salty and crunchy flavors and textures, add a bit of salt and crunch to your salads by doing some high and spiced nuts and sage for example. If you really like creamy things, add feta, avocado, or a beautiful homemade mayonnaise to your salads so that you're truly being satiated not just physically but also emotionally with that particular food.

Intuitive Eating

Another strategy is to adopt more of the principles of intuitive eating or mindful eating.

Just to give you a snapshot of what intuitive actually is, it's honoring your level of hunger and respecting fullness, being satisfied emotionally and physically with food, viewing food as a positive and not negative, avoiding restrictive dieting mentality, and accepting that slow progress is still progress rather than seeking perfection. There's patience involved with intuitive and mindful eating.

A lot of the principles that I've listed here, we've actually already discussed these in different ways. We just haven't really called it intuitive eating. Intuitive eating is quite different from what we call controlled eating. An intuitive eater relies more on internal cues which governs what they eat and how much they eat versus relying on external rules. That's a really major differential there.

We also know that intuitive eaters spend less time thinking about food. They are less likely to be overweight. They are less likely to have bingeing episodes or eating. They are less likely to rebel essentially because they're really in tune with their body, their cues and what they need. They also see food as nourishment and celebration, family and enjoyment. All these positive words we should be associating with food versus the negative ones like worry, pain, and restriction.

If you do want more information on intuitive eating, or mindful eating, there is a lot out there. Please contact me if you do want more information. It is a really lovely approach to eating.

If you're not sure where to start with becoming more of an intuitive eater, try the following things. Firstly, eat more fruits and vegetables that you actually like. As I said earlier, if you don't like brussels sprouts, then don't force them down. if you do love carrot or broccoli or onion, then eat more of those. Eat more of the produce that you actually like.

Secondly, be prepared to cook more from scratch. We've talked a lot about the yum factor. Increasing the deliciousness with your diet and the benefit of having healthy, home cooked whole foods that are balanced in terms of macronutrient intake. That's the second place to start.

Thirdly, just be really mindful of your appetite and level of hunger. Something that I often say about intuitive and mindful eating is although it is simple, it isn't always easy. Don't expect that you're going to become more of an intuitive eater overnight. Usually this kind of stuff takes time.

Use the right language

Your language is really powerful. Even if it's not the type of language that you use externally, think about your internal dialogue. It's much more powerful than many of us actually realize. I'd like you to start using words like celebration, acceptance, love, satisfaction, and the words I've mentioned here rather than words like guilt, worry, pain, and restriction.

These thoughts and words do actually affect your biology. They affect the way you digest and metabolize food. It's really quite amazing when you think about it. It's simple, but it's powerful. I would suggest if you are using the wrong kind of terminology, try your hardest to change that habit.

Get your beauty sleep.

There have been lots of really good studies looking at the association between sleep deprivation and food behavior. We know that being sleep deprived impacts the areas of the brain that are associated with appetite regulation, which means that our bodies are more resistant to the hormones that tell us that we've eaten enough when we're sleep deprived. When you put someone eating what we call an fMRI, or a functional MRI machine, which is really just a fancy machine that detects brain activity, if that person hasn't slept enough, their brain behaves and acts like they're on some kind of starvation diet or highly restricted diet, with really similar patterns in circuits being activated. We also know that people who are sleep deprived generally eat around 300 more calories a day, which is a pretty

high amount when it's done consistently, when the sleep deprivation is enduring.

Not only this, we also know that when we're tired we crave the foods that have the highest amount of calories. In other words, it's not just any food that we want when we're sleepy, it's the really the high energy stuff that packs a punch with sweetness, saltiness, and starch (like ice cream, donuts, pizza, chips). We also know, and this is not new, that sleep deprivation impairs your ability to make good judgment. Just think about driving. We don't drive when we're sleepy because we have very poor judgment at being one of the side effects of that.

When we're sleep deprived, we also develop something called optimism bias. This is where we downplay any negatives and focus more on the potential upsides. When we're tired, we also want to be more instantly gratified and care less about the long-term effects of our decisions. That whole cycle of guilt, frustration can be perpetuated, which is problematic because that's the exact cycle we're trying to break.

You can see that sleep is really, really important to prioritize. I haven't gone into strategies to help with sleep quality because it may not be an issue for some of you. Really, that would be a whole book or tutorial in its own right. My main point here is just to prioritize it. If you're not getting quality sleep, and it is an issue for you, make sure that you're getting help for that.

Take Home Messages

1. Modifying your environment
2. Add deliciousness to your meals, don't forget the 'yum factor'
3. Create new memories around healthy foods.
4. Change the language you use, especially if you feel that you're currently using the wrong kind of internal or external dialogue.
5. Practice intuitive and mindful eating, keeping in mind that it is a practice and it does take a bit of time.
6. Balance those meals. Including your first class proteins, nourishing fats, and a rainbow of plants at all of your main meals is a really powerful way to really nourish your brain and body both physically and emotionally.
7. Prioritise sleep

Remove any stigma that you may currently associate with emotional eating. Let go of any shame, guilt, and the perception that your tendency to emotionally eat is some kind of character flaw. It's really important that you let go of this belief so that you can move forward.

Until next time,
Stacey.