

# Self Healing

## *Expressing & Nurturing Emotions Without Abusing Food or Your Body*

A lot of our emotions often get tangled up in food, weight, and body issues. As a result, many of us eat even though we are not physically hungry; many of us do not stop eating even though we are physically satisfied; and others of us don't eat even though we physically need to consume food.

*What is true physical hunger?*

*What does it feel like?*

Hunger is an internal, physiological drive to find and eat food. It usually occurs 3-6 hours after eating a meal (or substantial snack) when our blood sugar levels begin to drop. Hunger usually results in an empty, grumbling feeling in our stomach. We may feel weak, shaky, dizzy, irritable or even get a headache.



When we were babies, we all had a very good sense of physical hunger. We instinctively cried and searched for our mother's breast or bottle when we were hungry. Just the same, we instinctively stopped sucking and turned away from our mother's breast or bottle when our physical needs were met.

*Do we only eat out of physical hunger?*

*Do we always stop eating when our physical needs are met?*

Absolutely not! Now our appetites are affected by a variety of external stimuli that have nothing to do with our internal physical needs. What are some external cues that trigger you to start eating or to overeat?

- **Emotions:** Anxiety or stress, loneliness, sadness, happiness, boredom, fatigue or sleepiness—all of these emotions may trigger eating (or overeating).
- **Rewards:** "I deserve to eat this, I've had a hard day." "Our team/class won, so we get to celebrate with all-you-can-eat pizza!"
- **Social situations:** Parties, holidays, eating out, being with friends, family, or co-workers—we may associate food and eating with each of these social situations.
- **Habit:** "I always eat while watching TV." "I have to clean my plate, my parents always told me to."
- **Senses:** The delicious aroma of fresh-baked cookies may trigger you to drop into a bakery for a sample, even if you've just had lunch.

- **Deprivation/Diets:** Whether intentional or not, going without adequate food (or favorite foods) for long periods of time often trigger overeating beyond physical requirements once they are made available.

Eating in response to these external cues is mostly a learned response (i.e. we aren't instinctively driven to eat for these reasons) and **it's totally normal to sometimes eat (and even overeat) for these reasons**. Eating in response to these external stimuli too frequently however, can result in weight problems and unhealthy disordered behaviors.

*Do we sometimes NOT eat even though we are physically hungry?*

Absolutely! Now we sometimes suppress our hunger and/or choose to ignore it. What are some reasons why you don't eat even though you physically need food?

- **Diets:** "I can't eat that. It's not allowed on my diet!"
- **Guilt:** "I overate last night, so I'm not going to eat anything today to make up for it."
- **Emotions** (often disguised as "fat feelings"):
  - Feeling out of control or overwhelmed: "At least I can keep my weight in control."
  - Feeling unhappy: "If only I were thin, my life would be so much better. If I stick to my diet, I'll be happier."
- **Time constraints:** "I'm too busy to stop for lunch."



Food is one of our most basic human needs. Denying ourselves from eating is similar to denying ourselves from going to the bathroom. When you have to go, you REALLY have to go. Otherwise, you'll start obsessing about how badly you need to go, you won't be able to concentrate on anything else, and eventually, you will have an accident (i.e. you'll wet your pants). The same is true with eating. If you don't eat when your body tells you to, you'll start obsessing about food, you won't be able to concentrate on anything else, and eventually, you will have an accident (in this case, you'll overeat!). It's totally normal to sometimes NOT eat once in a while because you're on the go, and food is not readily available. But, ongoing restriction of food intake can result in weight problems and unhealthy disordered behaviors.

## Heal Disconnected Eating

Disconnected eating occurs when eating behavior is mostly controlled by the external factors discussed above (rather than the internal physiological responses to hunger). Read on to learn how to untangle your emotional issues from your food issues and to discover physically connected eating again.

*I Feel Fat! When fat is not what I really feel.*

**Learn to identify and express your true emotions.**

Fat is not a feeling. You don't feel brunette or blonde; how can you feel fat? Often we translate all of our negative or uncomfortable feelings into the "language of fat." Putting yourself on a diet is not going to make these underlying feelings go away. It's just a temporary way to numb or distract yourself. Click [here](#) for a journal to record your food emotions.

## Some tips:

- Next time you feel "fat," try to pinpoint exactly what you are feeling. Are you feeling insecure, inadequate, or overwhelmed? Sad, helpless, or angry?
- Once you've identified your feelings, try to get them out. Write them down in a personal journal, talk about them with a close friend or family member, share them with a counselor ([CAPS](#) is a great resource). If you get your feelings out, it's easier to deal with them appropriately and/or let them go. Otherwise, you're more likely to translate them into "fat feelings" and incorrectly respond to them with self-hatred and dieting.

*Starving for control. When weight control is not what I really want.*

**Learn to set limits and assert independence without food.**

It's not uncommon for college students to feel like their lives are completely out of control. After all, they are being stretched in a million different directions, trying to meet the never-ending demands of their professors, their student groups, their employers, their parents, their friends, their romantic partners, and in some cases, their own children. All this while they face the uncertainty of their immediate future ("Will I get financial aid? Who am I going to live with next year? Am I going to get all my classes? What will be served in the dining halls tonight?"), as well as the unknowns of their long-term future (Where will I get a job after I graduate? Who will I marry? What exactly do I want to be when I grow up?). With all these demands and uncertainties, it's no wonder you feel out of control. However, rigidly controlling your food intake, exercise plan, and weight or shape will do nothing to help you gain control over your life.



On the contrary, you may find yourself more unhappy, more isolated, more overwhelmed, and more out of control by trying to control these things.

## Some tips:

- **Accept that many things in life cannot be controlled.** While it's good and necessary to plan and prepare for your future, it's impossible to know exactly what tomorrow will bring. Change may be uncomfortable, but it is a reality. It's better to expect it, rather than desperately try to avoid it. Try to focus on the present (i.e. what you need to accomplish today, this week, or this quarter), and hold off on worrying about next year and beyond.
- **Check your balance.** There are six aspects of human wellness (physical, emotional, spiritual, occupational, intellectual, and social). Each of these aspects needs to be nurtured in order for you to be a truly healthy, happy, and whole individual. While it's normal to be stronger or weaker in certain areas, ignoring one or two areas can lead to imbalance and distress. For instance, if you spend all your time studying and working to maximize your intellectual and occupational self (and/or spend excessive time exercising or worrying about food to maximize your physical self), but you never allow yourself time to be with friends (social self) or to relax (emotional self), you may develop health problems related to stress (depression, anxiety, chronic headaches, digestive problems, high blood pressure, sleep problems, etc.). In addition, if you are focusing all of your energy in only one or two areas, you lose perspective of the overall importance of things. For instance, getting a "B" on a paper or gaining one pound becomes "the end of the world!" Finding your personal balance takes time, but is well worth the effort.
- **Learn to prioritize.** Make a list of all the activities you are juggling. Your list is probably quite long (including classes, homework, job, household chores, taking care of family, being with friends or romantic partner, and any number of extracurricular activities). Looking at your list, it's possible to see that you really don't have time to do all these things and still have enough time for your self (i.e. to exercise; to prepare healthy meals; to relax; and to get 8 hours of sleep every night). What is your alternative? Not take care of yourself? **Realize that if you don't take care of yourself, you'll be less effective in the other areas of your life.** So, you've got to find some way to make time for YOU. Start by ranking the activities that you value the most. To accomplish what matters most to you, you may have to give up some of the other activities on your list or learn to combine one with another. For instance, you may decide that your evening babysitting job is taking up more time (and causing more stress) than it's worth, so you give that up for a while. Or, you may discover that you can fit exercise in by combining it with something else. For example, you can exercise with friends, study while riding a stationary bike, do housework while dancing to music, or start walking to school.



- **Practice saying NO.** Are you someone who is always trying to please others? Who always takes on extra projects or responsibilities when you are asked to? Who sacrifices your own time, your own interests, or your own needs for someone else's benefit? If so, you are certain to feel exhausted, overwhelmed, resentful, angry, and out of control. Learning how to say "No" is not easy. You may be afraid of disappointing others or of being viewed negatively (or even disliked) by others if you say "No." But, this is unlikely. Just as you wouldn't stop liking or respecting someone because they declined to participate in one project or activity, your friends, peers, and co-workers will certainly not feel any differently about you. Being assertive with your needs and wants may not feel comfortable at first, but with practice and experience you'll reap the many rewards.
- **Let go of perfection.** While it's very positive to always strive for your personal best, it's not reasonable or healthy to strive for perfection in all things. No one is (or can be) perfect. If you set such high standards on yourself, you are certain to fail and feel inadequate no matter how well you perform.

*When Food is Love. When food relief is not what I really need.*

***Learn to nurture yourself without food.***

Separate emotional hunger from physical hunger. Before you put anything into your mouth, say "HALT." Ask yourself, is this physical **Hunger**? Or, am I eating because I'm feeling **Anxious/stressed**, **Lonely/depressed**, or **Tired/bored**. Remember that eating is not going to make the underlying feelings go away. It's just a temporary way to numb and comfort yourself. Click [here](#) for a food journal to practice the HALT method.

**Some tips:**

- **Talk through, rather than eat through, negative feelings.** Find a friend, family member, support group, or counselor you can be open with. Expressing your bottled up tension to a sympathetic ear can be incredibly helpful.
- **Enjoy things you find relaxing.** Music, bubble baths, fragrances, candles, massages, reading, napping, stretching...Take time to relax yourself on a regular basis – You deserve it!
- **Be close to nature.** Enjoy gardens, sunsets, the beach, birds, a campfire, the stars – Nature can be very soothing!



- **Increase loving feelings towards yourself and others.** Smile, give and receive hugs, reflect on your positive qualities, count your blessings, praise the things you like about yourself and others, learn to forgive yourself and others.
- **Move and enjoy your body.** Stretch, dance, breathe deeply, ride a bike, go for a walk, lift weights, roller blade, swim, take a yoga or an aerobics class, run...visit [UCLA Recreation](#) for some classes to get you started.
- **Get enough sleep.** Most people need somewhere between 7 and 8 hours of sleep every night. If your body is chronically sleep-deprived, your stress hormone levels will be elevated throughout the day, you will be less able to cope with various life stresses, and you will be more inclined to eat to keep yourself awake.
- **Be smart with caffeine.** [Caffeine](#) is a very effective stimulant found in coffee, tea, many sodas, and some over-the-counter medications and dietary supplements. While moderate amounts of caffeine can give you an extra physical and/or mental boost when you need it most, excessive caffeine intake can cause trouble. Excessive caffeine raises stress hormone levels, worsens anxiety, and interferes with quality sleep.



- **Seek spiritual connection.** Prayer, meditation, inspirational reading, reflection, check out these meditation [audio files](#).
- **Avoid unnecessary competition.** Too much concern with winning in too many areas of your life can create excessive tension and anxiety and make you aggressive.
- **Plan ahead.** Disorganization can breed stress. Having too many projects going simultaneously often leads to confusion, forgetfulness, and a sense that uncompleted projects are hanging over your head. When possible, take on projects one at a time and work on them until completed.

- **Have fun and remain playful.** We all need to occasionally escape the pressures of life and have fun. Find activities that are absorbing and enjoyable to you: write, paint, sing, play a musical instrument, visit a museum or amusement park, go to a movie or sporting event, travel, learn a new skill, play a game...remember to let yourself laugh out loud!