**Emotional overeating vs binge eating disorder**

These two terms have lots in common, they both talk about a time when an individual eats an amount of food as a coping strategy for emotional hunger.

**Emotional hunger vs physical hunger**

This kind of eating is not related to physical hunger, instead it is about satisfying an emotional hunger.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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**What is emotional overeating?**

Enjoying food as a reward or pick-me-up from time to time is a normal and natural part of life and when used as part of a range of strategies to manage emotions and cope, it can be helpful and is something most people do. However, if this is the only strategy and it happens so regularly you feel you are out of control, or caught in a cycle, problems arise.

**How can I spot the signs and symptoms of emotional overeating?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioural</th>
<th>Psychological</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bingeing</td>
<td>Shorter term:</td>
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**What causes emotional overeating?**

We are still learning more about the causes of emotional overeating and eating disorders. There is no one main cause or trigger for an individual and it is likely to be a complex combination of genetic, psychological, environmental, social and biological influences. Spotting the signs and symptoms of emotional overeating in yourself or someone you know can be difficult, particularly as often the eating behaviour is kept hidden or secret from those around them.

**What could increase the risk of developing emotional overeating?**

- Other mental health conditions like depression and anxiety.
- Stressful or traumatic events in your past.
- Disatisfaction with the way you look.
- Isolation, boredom or feelings of stress and anger.
- Differences in your brain or the level of hormones produced by your brain to others who don’t eat emotionally.
- Following strict, low calorie or restricting diets.
What is emotional overeating?

Emotional overeating means turning to food for comfort and escape during times of low mood. When someone overeats emotionally it is as an attempt to feel better, to feel comforted or soothed by eating.

Emotional hunger vs physical hunger

Emotional hunger is driven by internal feelings such as stress, anger, or sadness. Physical hunger is driven by the body's need for energy. Emotional overeating is not related to physical hunger, as the amount of food eaten in an episode of emotional overeating does not need to be large.

Emotional overeating

• Feeling fed up
• Worry
• Shame
• Guilt
• Anxiety
• Depression
• Relief
• Other mental health conditions like depression
• Low self-esteem and sense of self-worth.

Physical hunger

• Does not cause guilt or trigger binge eating
• Satisfied with a full stomach
• A range of foods sound appealing
• Comes on gradually
• Long term

Emotional overeating cycle

Emotional overeating is a type of eating that is triggered by emotional factors, such as stress or sadness. This cycle involves a cycle of emotional overeating, followed by feelings of guilt, shame, and distress. These feelings then lead to more overeating.

Looking for support?

Beat is a registered charity in England and Wales (801343) and Scotland (SC039309).

A charity registered in England and Wales (801343) and Scotland (SC039309).

info@beateatingdisorders.org.uk

0300 123 3355

Norwich, NR1 1SZ

Unit 1 Chalk Hill House, 19 Rosary Road, Norwich, NR1 1SZ

With thanks: Beat is funded by Recovery and volunteers. Support group participants and the contributions from HSCVF to create this leaflet.

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*Beat survey, 2014

86% of people who emotionally overeat told us they had a negative body image of themselves.

*Beat survey, 2014

86% of people who emotionally overeat said that their eating is not urgent in nature.

*Beat survey, 2014

86% of people who emotionally overeat said that eating appeals to them.

*Beat survey, 2014

86% of people who emotionally overeat said they feel satisfied with a full stomach.

*Beat survey, 2014

86% of people who emotionally overeat said they do not cause negative emotions.

*Beat survey, 2014

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**Helpline:** 0808 801 0677
help@beateatingdisorders.org.uk
@BeatEDSupport
BeatEDSupport

@beatED
Beat eating disorders
Unit 1 Chalk Hill House, 19 Rosary Road, Norwich, NR1 1SZ
0300 121 3353
beateatingdisorders.org.uk
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A charity registered in England and Wales (103134) and Scotland (SC039309).
Company limited by guarantee no 2568495

Funded by

With thanks Beat is grateful to the funding from HCVF to create this leaflet and the contributions from support group participants and volunteers.

Version 10. Sources used to create this information are available by contacting Beat. We welcome your feedback on our information resources.
Help and support

Recovery from emotional overeating is possible, read on for support for yourself and others.

Self-help strategies

**Self-care**
Be kind and forgiving to yourself. Acknowledge that emotional overeating is not a weakness in character but a mental health issue. Take time to do something calming, comfortable and non-food related: going for a walk, reading your favourite book, trying meditation are just some ideas.

**Food and mood diaries**
Keeping a diary of the food you eat can encourage eating healthily and mindfully. Commenting on your mood alongside food might help you understand patterns and identify trigger times. Keeping a diary recording how you’re feeling is a way to express yourself and help you make sense of how you are feeling. Some people use journals to note positive things every day – a good pick-me-up during times of low mood.

**Art, creativity, self-expression**
Tapping into your creative side can help you take time out from a busy schedule, express emotions and reflect. Take pride and satisfaction in what you create.

**Distraction techniques**
If you can identify triggers and put strategies in place to help find comfort and support without turning to food, it can help to break the cycle of emotional overeating.

**Exercise**
Taking regular exercise brings benefits to both physical and mental health. It releases happy hormones within the brain, helping to increase feelings of happiness and motivation. It can also help to control weight. Exercising regularly doesn’t mean joining a gym, which can be expensive and you might find it daunting to start exercising in public. Walking is a great form of exercise, try an exercise video at home or find a trusted friend to go to a class with you for support.

**Talking with friends and family**
Although it can be difficult, talking to someone you trust can provide comfort. It can help them understand what you’re going through and see how they can best support you.

**Self-help books**
There are lots of books which can help you understand more about emotional overeating and how to use self-help strategies on your way to recovery. Visit beateatingdisorders.org.uk/recovery-information/book-reviews to find some we have read and reviewed.

Finding professional help and support

You might find to overcome your emotional overeating you need to seek out professional help or support.

**Visit your GP**
Your GP should be able to support and refer, if necessary to other NHS services in your area. This might mean seeing a dietician or nutritionist, an eating disorder specialist or prescribing medication to help your recovery.

**Seek counselling**
There are many registered counsellors who specialise in supporting people with eating problems. Find them on Beat’s HelpFinder (helpfinder.beateatingdisorders.org.uk). While you might need to pay for a private counsellor some local charities may provide this free of charge.

**Join a support group**
Talking about your experiences with others going through similar situations can help you feel less alone. They might also give you the opportunity to exchange distraction techniques and coping methods. Find them on Beat’s HelpFinder (helpfinder.beateatingdisorders.org.uk) or join our online Nightingale support group at 7pm every Friday for people suffering with emotional overeating or binge eating.

**Call, email or chat online to Beat’s Helpline**
Beat’s Helpline offers support and information about eating disorders. If you’re worried about yourself or someone you know call or email the service to speak to one of our Helpline Support Workers. 0808 801 0677 help@beateatingdisorders.org.uk. For more information visit: beateatingdisorders.org.uk/support-services.

I’m worried about someone I know

Emotional overeating doesn’t just affect the individual but the people around them too. You might feel at a loss at what to do or how to support them. By reading this leaflet and learning more about emotional overeating you’ve already made a big first step.

**How to help:**
- Ask them if they’d like to talk.
- Be prepared to speak openly and honestly.
- Leave any prejudice behind – emotional overeating isn’t about a lack of willpower or education about exercise and healthy eating, but a complex mental health issue.
- Be understanding and patient.
- Encourage them to seek help.
- Offer your support – could you accompany them to support groups or their medical appointments? Is there a particular difficult time when it would be useful to have someone to call?
- You can’t change the person but you can empower and support them to their recovery.

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Emotional overeating cycle

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Helpline: 0300 123 3355 • beateatingdisorders.org.uk
Youthline: 0808 801 0711 • youthline@beateatingdisorders.org.uk
Studentline: 0300 123 3355 • studentline@beateatingdisorders.org.uk
Funded by: National Lottery Community Fund

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Emotional overeating vs binge eating disorder

These two terms have lots in common, they both talk about a time when an individual eats an amount of food as a coping strategy for emotional hunger.

Emotional overeating

- A type of eating behaviour
- The amount of food eaten in an episode of emotional overeating does not need to be large
- A range of foods sound appealing
- Satisfied with a full stomach
- Does not cause negative emotions

Binge eating disorder

- A specific mental health diagnosis which may be given when binge eating occurs regularly over a prolonged period of time and is causing distress
- In a binge eating episode a person will eat an unusually large amount of food
- Physical hunger can trigger binge eating
- Ritualistic in nature – binges might be planned in advance, particular foods and plates used and some people say they feel like they are in a ‘trance’

How can I spot the signs and symptoms of emotional overeating?

- Bingeing
- Eating in secret
- Hiding food wrappers
- Spending lots of money on food
- Becoming withdrawn

Emotional overeating

- Short term:
  - Comfort
  - Relief
  - Escape

- Longer term:
  - Depression
  - Anxiety
  - Guilt
  - Shame
  - Worries

- Feeling fed-up

Physical

- Stomach pains
- Bloating
- Feeling sick
- Poor skin
- Trouble sleeping
- Weight gain

How can I help someone with emotional overeating?

With thanks: Beat is grateful to the funding from RCUK to create this leaflet and the contributions from support group participants and volunteers.

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