

Help for Emotionally Triggered Eating

By Sally Shannon

If you find that you spend a good portion of your time angry or frustrated and are overeating because of it, you may want to get help. The following peer groups often discuss issues surrounding emotionally triggered eating and are either free or have a nominal fee.

- Log on to [Overeaters Anonymous](#) or call 505-891-2664.
- Log on to [Take Off Pounds Sensibly \(TOPS\)](#) or call 800-932-8677.
- Other options are group or individual therapy, which can be specifically centered on weight control or anger management. To receive a referral for a psychologist in your area, call the American Psychological Association at 800-964-2000.

Reference website: <http://www.everydayhealth.com/diet-nutrition/food-and-mood/your-attitude/help-for-emotionally-triggered-eating.aspx>

Stop Eating Your Anger

Lose weight instead of swallowing your feelings.

By Sally Shannon

Four years ago, Barbara Konwinski of Wyoming, Michigan, weighed 268 pounds. "I was so angry — just angry at my life in general," the 54-year-old teacher, mother and wife recalls. "I felt I had no control over anything." Although she's normally cheerful and outgoing, a series of events that would challenge anyone — her husband's job loss when his company relocated, a house fire and a serious accident involving her oldest son — brought Barbara to an emotional low. And her weight to an all-time high. "Only food would appease me," she recalls. "So I would grab a cookie, eat it and then feel worse, because in addition to being angry and frustrated with my family's circumstances, I'd be angry with myself for eating. Then I would turn around and eat two more cookies."

Barbara was literally stuffing her anger, something many women who struggle with their weight do, experts say. This is how it works: You have a run-in at the office, you open your mail to find a monster bill or your teenager rolls her eyes at you and stomps away. Your next stop is the kitchen or perhaps the staff lounge, where somebody brought in a cake. Never mind that you have been making a conscious effort to eat less. Down goes the cake, the leftover pizza or whatever else is around.

"We've learned from thousands of patients that women often internalize their anger," says Gerard J. Musante, Ph.D., director of Structure House, a residential weight-loss center in Durham, North Carolina. "They use food to deal with the depression, emotional hurts and reduced self-esteem that follows."

"People who swallow their anger feel, for whatever reason, that they can't express it, so they resort to food," says Thomas Wadden, M.D., director of the Center for Weight and Eating Disorders at the University of Pennsylvania's medical school.

"The irony is, nobody enjoys eating when they're stuffing hostile feelings," Dr. Wadden adds. "Even if it's delicious, you may not notice the taste or how much you've eaten."

Eating out of anger or frustration often sparks binges, which can really pile on the pounds, says Howard Rankin, Ph.D., psychologist and author of *Inspired to Lose*. Rather than eating just one or two cookies, you eat the whole bag, only to then move on to other food items. Keeping anger under wraps also is draining, because it uses a lot of energy, says Dr. Rankin. "The angry person may feel very empty and very hungry, with a desperate need to eat."

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9 Ways to Change

By Sally Shannon

The comfort of a sugar high is another factor. In the 1970s, researchers at MIT found that sugars and starches have a powerful effect on serotonin, a brain chemical that helps control both our emotions and our eating, which is why we tend to crave those types of foods when we're upset. Some of the newer drugs for anxiety or depression, such as Zoloft and Paxil, also help alleviate symptoms by increasing serotonin activity in the brain. So, in a very real way, eating two jelly doughnuts or a candy bar is a type of self-medication.

For Barbara, the turning point was when she learned she needed quadruple bypass surgery at age 48. Lying in her hospital bed, she resolved not to be a victim of emotionally triggered eating any longer. "It was literally do or die," she recalls.

As soon as she was able, she began going to local meetings of a national weight-loss support group called Take Off Pounds Sensibly (TOPS). Through discussions with friends there, she found the strength to change what she could about her life, including her eating and **exercise habits**. Barbara lost over 100 pounds and has kept most of the weight off for four years. "Now I work off any anger and **stress** by exercising, not by eating. I feel great!" she says.

If you suspect you often eat because you're angry or frustrated, what can you do about it?

Recognize that your life is never going to be trouble-free.

There will always be people and situations that upset your equilibrium. Anger or frustration may be totally justified. Your goal is not to deny those feelings, but to react to them in ways that benefit you and don't involve food.

Put a name to what you are feeling.

If you can't respond to the provocation out loud, suggests Eleanor Cole, PhD, a New York City psychologist who specializes in anger management, simply say to yourself, "I am so angry! That creep has loaded me up with more than my share of work again!" can be freeing.

Forgive yourself.

If the person you're angry with is you, talk to yourself about those feelings. Then make a conscious effort to forgive yourself: "I'm mad that I couldn't ask that waitress to take back the cold coffee. But maybe next time I'll feel strong enough. It's okay that I'm not perfect." If you are honest with yourself about your anger or frustration, you may be less likely to "stuff" feelings.

Beware of "You can't control me!" or defiance eating.

"Defiance eating often happens between spouses when one complains about the other's weight problem," says Dr. Wadden. "It also happens with overweight adolescents when a parent polices the kitchen." Eating to excess, even though it ultimately hurts the eater, is a way of expressing a strong emotion that isn't coming out. A better response? At a calm moment, have a frank discussion with your husband. Say, "Your criticism hurts and is not helping me." Then suggest what he can do to help.

Take your emotional temperature each time you begin eating.

All the experts say so many Americans are overweight because we're constantly surrounded by tasty treats and we reach for them. In fact, we often eat when we're not truly hungry just because the food is there. Get into the habit of asking yourself why you feel like eating, preferably before you take the first bite. Plan ahead about what you will do if you are eating to ease negative feelings. For example, say to yourself, "I'm not going to stay in the conference room where all the food is. I'll calm myself by walking down to the supply closet instead."

Install roadblocks to ward off emotionally triggered eating.

Dr. Musante says he knows one woman who never carries anything less than a \$5 bill, because the food and candy machines at her office take only \$1 bills. Of course, she could ask a colleague for change, but often she regains her equilibrium before she gets that far. Other ideas: Dump the fiction that you buy goodies for your kids when you know you're prone to eat them yourself. Agree to be "gripe buddies" with a friend. Instead of eating when you're frustrated, call her to let off steam, and vice versa.

Reject lingering cultural baggage, like "Ladies don't get mad."

Everybody gets mad. "I'm incredibly uncomfortable about having negative feelings, especially when I'm around my mother," says lawyer Elizabeth Summerfield, 46, of Los Angeles. Elizabeth says she knows a lot of her trouble with expressing anger verbally comes from constantly having angry feelings tamped down as a child. "It's still widely thought in our culture that it simply isn't feminine to fight," she says.

Jot down what you eat each day.

Most people underestimate the number of calories they consume by 50 to 100 percent, observes Dr. Rankin. The more overweight you are, the more likely that you often eat without being fully aware of how much is going into your mouth, he says. Making a list helps you get a grip on what you eat, how much, when and why.

Don't expect to totally change your anger style overnight.

Especially if your number-one anger trigger is your boss or job, don't just wake up one morning and decide you're going to start telling people off, says Dr. Cole. "While it's good to begin expressing angry feelings in an appropriate way, if you've been passive previously and have taken what's handed out to you, people around you often won't be happy about your new behavior," she says. All changes in the way people act take time and persistence.

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