



TIP SHEET



Understanding Comfort Eating

What is comfort eating?

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Eating in response to emotions, particularly if you are not hungry, is known as comfort eating.

We all comfort eat from time to time. However, the big difference between so-called 'naturally thin' people and those who aren't is that the naturally thin don't usually use food as anything other than a source of often enjoyable nutrition.

The rest of us, however, can use it for:

- **comfort**
- **to de-stress**
- **as a reward**
- **to stave off boredom**
- **to cheer us up**
- **to change how we are feeling**

When we are eating for comfort, food becomes a way of making ourselves feel better. It might just be caused by a stressful day or by something that is worrying us. Or it may go down to something more significant

- **poor relationships**
- **lack of love**
- **lack of confidence or security**
- **low self-esteem**

Food becomes less of a way to provide us with nutrition and more of a way to make us feel better and take away all our worries and stresses.

Unfortunately comfort eating never achieves the desired effect, except in the very short term - whilst we are eating. Some foods, such as chocolate, affect the chemicals (endorphins) in the brain that regulate your mood. For that reason, you often feel better

straight after you have eaten chocolate but these effects usually don't last for very long.

Afterwards we are likely to feel miserable, and annoyed about the effect such eating will have on our weight. In fact you probably end up feeling worse after comfort eating than you did before you ate the comfort foods, which rather defeats the purpose!

If you don't do something about it, comfort eating can stay with you for life, always undermining and sabotaging your efforts to lose weight and being able to effectively manage your emotions.



How it all starts

Comfort eating is something that is instilled in us from birth. When we were babies we cried and our mothers comforted us with their milk. As we grew older we were given treats for comfort or when we hurt ourselves. We were rewarded with sweets or the occasional ice cream when we were good.

We were learning the lessons that food could make us feel better. And the early lessons in life always stay with us. But, unfortunately for many of us, these comfort eating lessons often come back later in life and cause weight management difficulties.

When we feel under pressure or when we get upset or worried those old comfort eating buttons get pressed and no food is safe!



The important thing to realise is that comfort eating is not about being greedy and not being able to cope - it is a learned behaviour. A way of trying to make ourselves feel better with food. We therefore come to associate some foods with comfortable feelings.

▼ How can a psychologist help?

Psychological approaches to weight-loss aim to help you make changes that are very powerful and long-lasting. Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy is a highly structured, practical therapy which addresses weight management issues by identifying and addressing beliefs and thinking patterns, feelings and behaviours that are contributing to unsuccessful weight-loss or maintenance attempts.

▼ Ideas for Managing Your Eating

If you are concerned about always overeating in response to certain emotions, then there are a number of things you can do to help manage it.

✓ **Be aware of what makes you eat-**

It is helpful to look at your eating patterns and try to work out what is causing you to eat. It may be that you are eating because you are feeling sad or stressed. It is also important to be aware of how often you have these feelings. If it is happening regularly, then you may need to look at other ways of managing these feelings. Keeping a diary about what you eat and how you feel before and after you eat can help you to see what triggers your eating.

✓ **Explore other ways for managing feelings-**

Comfort eating involves eating to help you deal with how you are feeling. It may be that there are things you could do to help you deal with your feelings in a healthier manner. You may like to try exercise, drawing or writing.

✓ **Plan for dealing with boredom –**

It is not uncommon to eat when you are bored. If you find yourself doing this regularly, you may find it useful to think of some things you can do when you are bored. It may be ringing a friend, kicking a footy, reading a book or going for a walk.

✓ **Eating healthy food –**

If you are using food to cope with your feeling it may be something you have been doing for a long time. This may mean that it will take time to start using other methods to manage stress or your concerns. When you are eating it may be a good idea to try to eat healthy foods most of the time rather than those that are high in fat.

✓ **Urge Surf -**

Delay impulses to eat when you are not hungry, and ride out cravings. Engage in other activities for 10 minutes, such as checking your emails, reading a book or going for a walk, until the cravings have passed.

✓ **Talk to someone –**

By talking to your local doctor or a counsellor you should be able to work out some of the reasons why you may be comfort eating and different ways to manage it.

FOR FURTHER HELP: If you have any questions or need further help contact your GP or the number detailed below. Psychologists employed by Queensland Psychology Centre have at least six years of education and training to equip them to provide a professional and timely service to you in the area of weight management.

