



Food, Stress and Emotional Eating

By Cara Rosenbloom, RD

If you often turn to food when you feel stressed, sad or angry, this may be a coping mechanism known as emotional eating. Some people describe stress or sadness as an empty feeling and use food to fill the emptiness. You may reach for comfort food without realizing it, and even when you're not particularly hungry.

Comfort foods tend to be ultra-processed and high in salt, sugar, fat and calories; think pizza, French fries, cookies and ice cream. While these foods are fine as occasional treats, habitual consumption due to emotional eating can lead to health problems, including obesity, heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

If you're eating for reasons other than hunger, it's time to understand your habits. Dietitians and psychologists use mindful eating to help their patients curb emotional eating. They teach you to focus on your emotional and physical responses to food. Studies show that mindful eating can successfully help curb emotional or binge eating, stop impulsive food choices and help you make healthier choices.

Want to get started? Find a dietitian or psychologist who specializes in mindful eating. You'll begin by tracking what you eat and how you're feeling when you eat. This can help you see patterns between your mood and food cravings. Once you know your triggers, you can take steps to change. Some people learn to replace ultra-processed foods with healthier alternatives or turn to exercise or other non-food activities for comfort.

The Online Life: How Much is Too Much?

By Eric Endlich, PhD

During the pandemic, some people have tried to minimize infection risk through online shopping, telemedicine and virtual events. But spending too much time online can compromise your mental well-being.

Many people use social platforms to reach out to others. However, if you find that time on social media leaves you feeling lonely, isolated, sad or dissatisfied, it might help to decrease or avoid screen time — especially if you experience cyberbullying. If you use social media to relieve anxiety or depression, try to determine if this outlet is helping you.

Fear of missing out can lead you to respond compulsively to every alert, which can cause distraction, missed sleep and increased anxiety. Consider checking your alerts only at specific times and turn off your electronic device before bedtime. Prioritize time for self-care and in-person relationships. Disabling notifications or removing apps can lessen compulsive checking.

You can reduce excessive internet use by simply being mindful of your motivations and the amount of time you spend online. Are you online as a substitute for real life? If so, consider healthy alternatives, such as exercise, exploring interests or trying something new.



No-Mystery Meditation

Why meditation? Many people use it as a way to reduce stress, anxiety, depression or pain, and increase peace of mind. Although the practice of regular meditation is ancient, research into its potential health benefits is relatively new.

Meditating regularly is credited with reducing stress and negative emotions and increasing self-awareness, patience and creativity.

Meditation works to control the sympathetic nervous system, which increases your heart rate, breathing, blood pressure and stress. The only way to know how meditation can help you, especially with reducing stress, is to experience it. It takes mental focus. All that's needed is a few minutes of quiet time and practice. *Continued on back page. >>*





February is American Heart Month.



Exercise and Mood

By Eric Endlich, PhD

Whether you are feeling stressed, anxious, sad or mad, exercise can often help. Researchers have found a strong link between regular exercise and improvements in mental health and mood. Becoming more active can even enhance memory and cognition, too.

For example, Duke University researchers found that people who are active are less depressed than more sedentary folks. Studies also show exercise can help reduce anxiety and even control panic attacks, according to the American Psychological Association (APA).

Here's how physical activity has a positive impact on your mental outlook: Although exercise is a form of physical stress, physical activity helps manage your emotional stress because, after physical activity, you experience lower levels of stress-linked hormones, such as cortisol and epinephrine. And that can boost mood.

It turns out that all forms of exercise — from walking and yoga to running and sports — improve mood. But if you are feeling too anxious, stressed or down to find the motivation to exercise, how do you start? The APA advises that beginning with any amount of physical activity, even a short walk, is better than not starting at all. You may soon find your mood is better and you look forward to exercise.



Heartbreakers You Can Live Without

Heart disease remains the leading cause of death for men and women of most racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. Nearly half of all Americans have some form of cardiovascular disease. But it is highly preventable.

The CDC has tied 80% of deaths caused by heart disease to six preventable conditions. Review them here:

- 1. Ongoing obesity** can elevate your blood cholesterol, blood pressure and blood sugar levels, raising your risk of heart disease, stroke and diabetes. Scientists believe you are more likely to develop these conditions if most of your added weight is in your waist or upper body.
- 2. Unhealthy cholesterol** levels can be a serious risk for heart disease. Eating smart (avoiding saturated and trans fats), exercising regularly, and weight control can help cholesterol numbers. For those unable to achieve desirable levels by behavior alone, prescription medications can improve cholesterol.
- 3. High blood pressure**, also called **hypertension**, often goes untreated. It is a leading cause of heart attack and stroke. Regular exercise and proper weight can help control and even prevent hypertension; some individuals may still require medication.
- 4. Not enough exercise** can reduce the strength and efficiency of your heart and blood vessels, leading to premature heart attack and stroke. Staying physically active helps control weight as well as blood cholesterol, blood pressure and blood sugar levels, which reduce your odds of cardiovascular illness.
- 5. Smoking harms your heart.** If you have high blood pressure or unhealthy cholesterol levels, you are at risk for heart attack; that risk increases significantly if you also smoke. If you have diabetes, smoking increases your risk of nerve damage and kidney failure, and you are three times as likely to die from heart disease as people who have diabetes and don't smoke.
- 6. Drinking too much alcohol** can raise blood pressure levels and the risk for heart disease. It also increases levels of triglycerides, a fatty substance in the blood, which can increase heart disease risk. Daily limits: for women, no more than one drink; for men, no more than two drinks.

No-Mystery Meditation

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The Harvard University Center for Wellness offers these guidelines to get you started:

- 1** Choose a quiet place to relax and meditate.
- 2** Sit comfortably in a chair or on the floor with your back straight.
- 3** Close your eyes or focus on a single object (e.g., a photo or candle).
- 4** Breathe slowly, deeply and gently.
- 5** Keep your mind focused inward or on the object; steer it back if it wanders.
- 6** Breathe peace and quiet into your heart and mind.



Meditation comes in many forms, including concentration, heart-energy-centered, mindfulness, tai chi, transcendental and walking. You might consider meditating with a group of people for a more powerful experience. And having a teacher can help you learn and succeed with meditation.

Note: Due to production lead time, this issue may not reflect the current COVID-19 situation in some or all regions of the U.S. For the most up-to-date information visit coronavirus.gov.

The **Smart Moves Toolkit**, including this issue's printable download, **Q&A: Heart attack signs?**, is at personalbest.com/extras/21V2tools.



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