

behaviour



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EMOTIONAL EATING

and other excuses

Psychologist **Angela Hook** explains the triggers that make us eat how we do.

BEING AWARE OF how our emotions affect our diet is a powerful tool in combating our self-sabotaging eating behaviours. For many of us there may be some very simple, habitual behaviours that keep that niggling extra 5-10 kilos in our lives. Like any habit, these are automatic and have very little to do with our knowledge of what we 'should' be doing. They are driven by our emotions, seated deep within our mammalian brains that drive us to do things that on an intellectual level we can't easily explain. Biologists talk about "fight or flight" as the most basic of human responses to external stimulus; given the frequent admissions of 'emotional eating' maybe we should change it to "fight, flight or eat!".

So why do we do it?

Emotional eating is made up of two components; an internal vulnerability and an external trigger. When it comes to food, internal vulnerabilities might be



things such as low blood sugar, hormones, too long between meals etc. The external triggers are events and situations in our lives that we can't easily walk away from. Common triggers include:

- Eating to combat stress or procrastinating through food. We may say we're taking time to refocus so we can complete a task, but food may be nothing more than a delay tactic and a way of coping with the feeling of being overwhelmed.

- Eating to ease the blues. Food is pleasurable. When we are down, food can pick us up.
- Welcome home eating. This is becoming more common as our lives become more stressful and we seek rewards for making it through another day. Coming home to the bounty of the kitchen can be reassuring and part of the process of winding down for the evening.
- Social eating. Eating is such a large part of our social lives and

to decline the offerings of our host, or worse still to be a host that doesn't serve something spectacular, can be a terrible social gaffe.

Solutions

What we really need to do to overcome emotional eating, is to find other ways to cope with stress, anxiety, and the need for comfort.

Being aware of how our emotions affect our diet is a powerful tool in combating our negative or self-sabotaging eating behaviours. For many of us there may be some very simple, habitual behaviours that keep that niggling extra 5-10 kilos in our lives.

- If we are going to use food as a reward for making it home in one piece, preparation is critical – what we have at home is what we will eat when we get there. Be prepared with something enjoyable but not junky.
- Think of other rewards and ways of dealing with stress that don't involve food and give yourself the permission and the means to experience these – phoning a friend, a walking circuit, an inspirational website might all be ways of overcoming stress that don't come with calories.
- If a task or situation is overwhelming, try to break it down into smaller, more manageable pieces. In the worst case scenario

ask someone for help! They just might be able to.

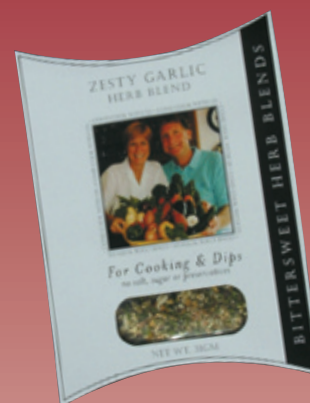
- In social situations, don't feel that you have to eat everything you are given. Those old chestnuts of 'nobody leaves the table' and 'it would be rude not to' went out with acid wash denim, and lets hope they both stay out. Neither one has a place in our wardrobes.

- If life is getting you down let technology, cheap call plans and bubble bath take the place of food. Talk to someone, rent your favourite movie, surf the web or take a bath to take your mind (and your body) away from the comforts of the kitchen.

It seems to be the trend of late to produce a wrist band to signify, celebrate or raise awareness of issues facing society. Maybe a nice pink wristband could help to raise awareness of emotional eating and the impact it's having on our health. Better still, we could make the wristband strawberry flavoured so if the whole thing stresses us out too much, we can always eat it!

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