What’s Eating You?

**Introduction**

Emotional eating is feeding our feelings instead of feeding an empty stomach. It isn’t just “negative” feelings like sadness, rejection, anger, depression or stress that may tell our brains that it’s time to eat. We may also eat as a way to heighten feelings of happiness, celebration, victory and joy.

For some, emotional eating involves downing lots of calories—often in the form of sugary or fatty foods. Others crave foods with specific tastes, textures or smells that bring them comfort.

Most of us probably do some emotional eating. Who wants to share their go-to comfort food?

*(Allow a minute for answers.)*

**Why Do We Do It?**

While scientists haven’t completely solved this puzzle, they know that emotional eating is related to how our bodies function and the way we live our lives. Many of us use food to numb our feelings the same way we would take a tablet for a headache. This relieves the symptom but not the cause. The more we turn to food for comfort, the more often our minds tell us food is the best way to deal with our feelings. Why do you think people turn to emotional eating?

*(Allow members to share and then go through the following reasons.)*

- Eating—especially high-fat, high-sugar foods—can distract us from the physical and psychological discomfort that accompanies some emotions.
- Eating creates a temporary sense of physical fullness that eases the emptiness that can come with depression, shame and low self-esteem.
- Hunger is sometimes associated with fears of being deprived or even abandoned, leading some of us to panic when hunger approaches.

If unchecked, emotional eating can turn into binge eating, though not all binge eating stems from emotions. In the extreme, some people may develop bulimia (bingeing followed by purging) as they attempt to use food to deal with negative feelings, only to find that eating too much makes them feel even worse.
Am I Really Hungry?

Ask yourself these questions to decide if you are responding to physical hunger or some emotional need:

- Did the urge to eat happen suddenly? Physical hunger actually builds gradually through time.
- Will only one certain food do? Emotional hunger often “shouts” for chocolate or a bag of chips in a loud, clear voice. Veggies will not do!
- Did you realize you ate the whole thing? You grabbed the food, and it was gone before you even had a chance to savor it.
- Are you stuffed but still want more? Physical hunger senses when the stomach is full. Emotional hunger does not.
- Do you feel guilty, ashamed or sorry about the choice? Sometimes emotional eaters feel worse when they realize that their food choices didn’t change their feelings (or the situation that caused uncomfortable feelings in the first place). They may become more sad, stressed or angry than they were before.

Discussion and Activity

(Discuss the following questions, allowing time for members to record their answers to each question and then share with the group before moving on to the next question.)

- Do you have a favorite comfort food? If so, what is it?
- How you can reduce the temptation to eat the whole box (or bag, or cake, etc.) when the urge to turn to food hits you? Jot down ideas you think will work best for you.
- Write down the name and phone number of at least one friend, family member or TOPS pal you could call when you need support for emotional eating.
- Are there any KOPS or good losers in your chapter who can share what has worked for them?
- Look over the Ways to Stop Emotional Eating handout. Have you tried any of these in the past? If so, did they work for you? Which ones? Are there others that you would like to try?

Write down one or two tips from Ways to Stop Emotional Eating you think would work for you. Then try them in the coming week. Be prepared to share with the group what worked and what didn’t next week.
Our feelings are not wrong or right any more than breathing is wrong or right. We just need to learn ways other than eating to manage them. Try these techniques:

1. **Identify and accept the emotions that you try to soothe or boost with food.** Throughout our lives, we learn that eating can give us something to do, provide a pleasant social setting, help us avoid addressing unpleasant feelings, provide a reward, recall a cherished memory or alleviate stress.
   Take time to journal what you were feeling when you chose to eat when you weren’t physically hungry.

2. **Figure out how to feed your feelings without food.** Knowing what is eating you is just as important as knowing what and how much you should be eating.
   - Exercise to release tension and to feel both calm and energized.
   - Soothe yourself with a soak in the tub or a cup of tea.
   - Take a break to read a book, watch a favorite show or enjoy a hobby.

3. **Stop and count to 10.** Minutes, that is. Emotional eating is often a matter of habit and happens without any real thought. Give yourself the time to think about the reason you want to eat. Delay can lead to understanding and a different choice. Try to picture yourself effectively managing this.
   - Pause a few minutes before you choose to eat if you suddenly have a craving.
   - Forgive yourself if you decide to go ahead and eat. Learn all you can from the choice and move on.

4. **Surround yourself with support.** Seek out and build relationships with positive people who will enrich your efforts to live your best life.
   - Reach out to a friend or member of your chapter. A concerned but independent listener will help restore your perspective and allow you to express your feelings.

5. **Be your own best friend.** Make it a priority to build healthy habits that keep you strong, rested and relaxed.
   - Aim for 7 to 8 hours of sleep each night. It actually helps reduce food cravings.
   - Take a walk when you are feeling stressed.
   - Schedule 15 minutes of “me time” to relax and restore your balance.