

The psychology of eating



Do you recognise any of the following excuses for eating when you're not hungry?

The Reward syndrome - When you have had a really bad day, been shopping, juggled the housework and fitted everything in, you feel you deserve a reward.

The "Last Supper" syndrome - I am going to start a diet tomorrow and I will never eat cake and biscuits again.

The closet syndrome - Nobody's looking. They know I'm on a diet, but if they don't see me, they won't know.

The kitchen syndrome - I am in the kitchen preparing a meal and the biscuit tin lid is off and because I'm there I eat them.

The "I'm fed up" syndrome - I'm bored, lonely, cross, angry at myself or someone else, and I'm going to eat something naughty.

The slippery slope syndrome - I missed breakfast; I ate far too much at lunch so a bit more won't make any difference.

A matter of taking control

For all of the above, what strategies can we adopt to avoid these situations getting out of our control, and leading to eating when we are not really hungry?

Appetite

How often have you eaten something and then immediately afterwards realised that you did not want to eat it in the first place. Something was telling you though, to assert your right to eat what you want when you want. You must learn to reconcile your mind to what your body requires, and ensure that your choices are harmonious and compatible with your desire to develop a healthy and slimmer body.

Family and friends

Friends and family can sometimes inadvertently be the worst offenders when it comes to support. They often mean well, but they tend to have strong habits that have been built up over a lifetime and any change can leave them feeling threatened or vulnerable.

Be aware of their sentiments and allay their fears. Do not let them kill you with their kindness – literally, and point this out to them. Particularly the ones who always insist that you have what has been made especially for you. **You must take control!** At the same time reassure them that you still value them and everything that they do for you. You genuinely care about their friendship and the strength that they give you. This way, next time you find you will be met with support and help rather than challenges – that is if they really are your friends.

Some families foster overeating for emotional or cultural reasons, or simply from ignorance. Parents might teach bad habits, like forcing children to clear everything on their plates, eating quickly, or use food as a tool for reward or discipline. A family habit of tying eating to

relaxation such as watching television and snacking is a “nurture” habit often accompanied by a sedentary lifestyle.

Habitual behaviour

Have you ever thought about why we develop habits? Well it's simple, doing things automatically without having to think about it is a useful and timesaving device. It allows us to perform lots of everyday mundane routines without distracting us from our normal thought processes, allowing for the more creative parts of our brains to keep working.

All habits that we form, at one time served a useful purpose, otherwise we would not have kept doing them for the 15 repetitions that it is estimated is needed to form a habit. However, often we forget to switch them off once they have served their useful purpose. Habits are just fragments of behaviour that you have picked up. They are not part of you, and they can be changed. Think carefully about your bad habits and how damaging they are.

Now is the time to start chipping away at those bad habits, and introducing good ones that will make you feel great about yourself, and will help you in many ways. Once you realise that your actions are simply bad habits, you take away their power over you, and it becomes much easier to change – permanently.

Be aware of your desires – Temptation or compulsion

If you are frequently in a situation where you just want one, and then go on until you must finish the box, packet, then temptation has given way to compulsion. Is it that 10 or 20 or 30 chocolates will suffice, or is it that psychologically “the box must be emptied”? The obvious answer is not to have boxes of these foods around. A more reasonable idea is to buy a small treat for one occasion that you can look forward to, and make a pact with yourself not to eat it unless..... whatever you decide.

Identify weaknesses

The whole point of having a strategy is so that you can identify the areas that you are vulnerable and make provisions for avoiding or mitigating those circumstances. Once you have identified your weaknesses, confront them and don't shy away from what the issues are. Discuss them with your Weight Management Consultant, and jointly come up with plans and strategies to overcome these situations. For instance if you are a snacker, then decide upon locations that you will not eat, at your desk, in front of TV in the street whatever. Remember that successful long-term weight management involves behavioural changes.

Notoriously difficult changes

It is important that clients recognise that dietary changes can be notoriously difficult to make, and apply the motivational and psychological techniques learned earlier to overcome ingrained bad dietary habits.

Write down your top 3 bad food habits in your truth diary

If there are certain habits that have formed over a long period of time, then the aim is to replace bad habits with good ones. Boredom and stress related eating require different strategies but as long as you recognise why you are deviating from your plan, then it is possible to work out a counter measure to get you back on track.

Be sure to complete in your truth diary the reasons that you ate food outside of your planned meals or snacks (5 eating points each day) and this will allow you to see patterns