

By Kimberly Dawn Neumann

Mind over munching

How to curb the urge to eat when you're stressed.
Or steamed. Or even "dinner's-on-me" ecstatic.

Think you know the four food groups? No, not those. The other four—the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual issues that psychologist Deirdra Price, Ph.D., says can turn meals into food fights.

We're not talking *Animal House* here, but rather the animalistic urge to eat...when you finally subdue your 2-year-old. When you appear to be the only partnerless shopper at Ikea. When Microsoft Excel mysteriously exits your computer the morning of your presentation. These are the times that try women's souls—and send us to the 7-Eleven



for Ho-Ho's.

"Whether your dietary habits range from deprivation and starvation to bingeing and purging, or you're just perpetually grazing on unhealthy foods, the core of your problem probably has more to do with what's in your head than what's in your mouth," says Dr. Price, author of *Healing the Hungry Self: The Diet-Free Solution to Lifelong Weight Management* and president of Diet-Free Solution, a program that helps people overcome food, weight, and body-image issues. In fact, says Dr. Price, it's only after you recognize that the

fatty morsel on your fork might actually be a big bite of emotional casserole that you can begin to heal your relationship with food—and lose weight.

“We can’t begin to conquer our weight problems until we change who we are inside,” she says. “And that means getting in touch with our emotions so we stop eating as a way to manage them.”

Here are three questions—and a trio of suggestions—that Dr. Price promises will help you do just that.

QUESTION #1 **Are you really hungry for food?**

You don’t always eat because you’re physically hungry. You can be emotionally hungry, too—like when you turn to your pals Ben & Jerry out of boredom. Yet it can be tough to distinguish between the two impulses—especially when you’re eating inconsistently because you’re dieting.

“If you eat regular meals, you’ll come to recognize when you’re usually hungry and how your body feels when it needs fuel,” says Dr. Price. “And as a consequence, you’ll also be able to recognize that sometimes what you’re feeling isn’t physical hunger, but emotional hunger—or, a need to eat because of your emotional state, not the status of your stomach.”

To help you sort out your sensations, Dr. Price compiled a checklist (at right) of common hunger symptoms and signals. Use it to determine which part of you is yearning for nourishment.

QUESTION #1 CHECKLIST

PHYSICAL HUNGER

- Growling stomach
- Empty stomach
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Fatigue
- Irritability
- Moodiness

EMOTIONAL HUNGER

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Boredom
- Loneliness
- Sadness
- Anger
- Frustration
- Internal emptiness
- Elation (the urge to use food as a reward for a successful experience)
- Regret (the urge to use food as a punishment for “being bad”)

To do: Make a “Physical and Emotional Hunger Chart.” Write “Physical” on one half of a piece of paper and “Emotional” on the other half. Then, the next time you reach for a doughnut, stop to consider which it is you’re feeling. Using the list of cues above, decide whether your need is physical or emotional, and jot down the sensation. After a week or so of diligently diagnosing and recording, you’ll get to know your pattern. Then you can respond by either feeding your body or tending to your emotions.



QUESTION #2

Why do you use food as a crutch?

Consider, for a moment, your food history. As a child, were you given food as a reward? Or deprived of something you loved—like cookies or chocolate pudding—if you misbehaved? Did your aunts give you food to soothe you? Or did you, as a college freshman, discover that certain foods can serve as companions or give you solace when you're down?

"The way your parents, extended family, close friends, and teachers acted has a great influence on you," says Dr. Price. "You learn how to approach food and how to deal with emotions from them." And some-

times food and emotions coincide.

The trick now? To recognize why you turn to food and then to reeducate yourself. "When you do that," says Dr. Price, "you've begun the process of owning, accepting, and dealing with your emotions."

In the checklist below, Dr. Price lists the most common reasons why people eat obsessively, starve themselves, or purge. Check all that apply to you.

QUESTION #3

How can you feed your emotions—without food?

Sure, emotions can be troublesome and tough to deal with. But you need them just as surely as you need, well, food. "The only way you know

QUESTION #2 CHECKLIST DO YOU USE FOOD...

- When you feel deprived of something?
- To stifle or numb your feelings?
- To comfort or nurture yourself, or to feel taken care of?
- To calm down?
- To distract yourself from difficult issues or to escape from reality?
- To feel in control when life feels beyond your control?
- To momentarily fill your internal emptiness?
- To procrastinate?
- To alleviate boredom?
- As a punishment for "being bad"?
- As a reward for "being good"?



To do: If you checked two or more statements, you tend to use food to cope with your emotions. It's time you made a "Food Use Chart." List why you use food on one half of a piece of paper (you can use the statements at left), and on the other half, list what you're avoiding or reinforcing. For instance, when you use food to procrastinate on a deadline, you're avoiding the stress of the deadline. Likewise, when you use food to calm down, you may be avoiding stress.

As you chart your impulses to eat, your patterns will emerge. Use them to identify what makes you reach for, push away, or purge food. And then you can address the dynamic—without food.

you're alive is through feelings—the pleasurable and the painful," says Dr. Price. "Imagine a world with only intellect, no heart. It would be such an empty place. You don't want to get rid of your emotions—just your impulse to eat in order to manage them."

For help, Dr. Price offers the following five food-free techniques for coping with even your most volatile emotions:

1. Feel your feelings. Sit through them for just 5 minutes to start with. Don't act, just sit—and see if you can identify exactly what it is you're feeling and why. Then grab your favorite treat if you must.



But work to gradually increase the time you set aside to analyze your emotions without eating because of them.

2. Put them on paper. Release any pent-up emotion by recording your feelings in a journal. An added plus: The act of writing or typing will keep your hands busy when you might otherwise be using them to carve into a cheesecake or rip open a bag of chips.

3. Reach out and touch someone. A strong support network can help you get your emotions out of the deep freezer. But don't call just any-

one. Decide which of your friends or relatives can best help you deal with different things. For instance, you might call one person when you're angry and another when you're lonely.

4. Pamper yourself. Replace the race for the cupboard with a different reward—say, a bubble bath, a massage, a manicure, a babysitter to watch the kids, or a trip to the mall. Make



Distract your thoughts of food with other pleasures.

yourself feel good—without a box of chocolates.

5. Work it out. A 30-minute session on a stair-climber or stationary cycle can release tension as well as endorphins (feel-good hormones that flood your body when you exercise). And what could be better than burning a few calories en route to improving your mood?

To do: Keep a daily record of the alternatives you use to feed your emotions. Note which ones allow you to take care of yourself without sneaking a cookie to decrease your distress, and use those methods consistently. Just one caveat: Replacing your impulse to eat won't be easy, so keep the list handy. The more you use your alternatives, the less you'll be tempted to turn to food to feel good. ♦

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