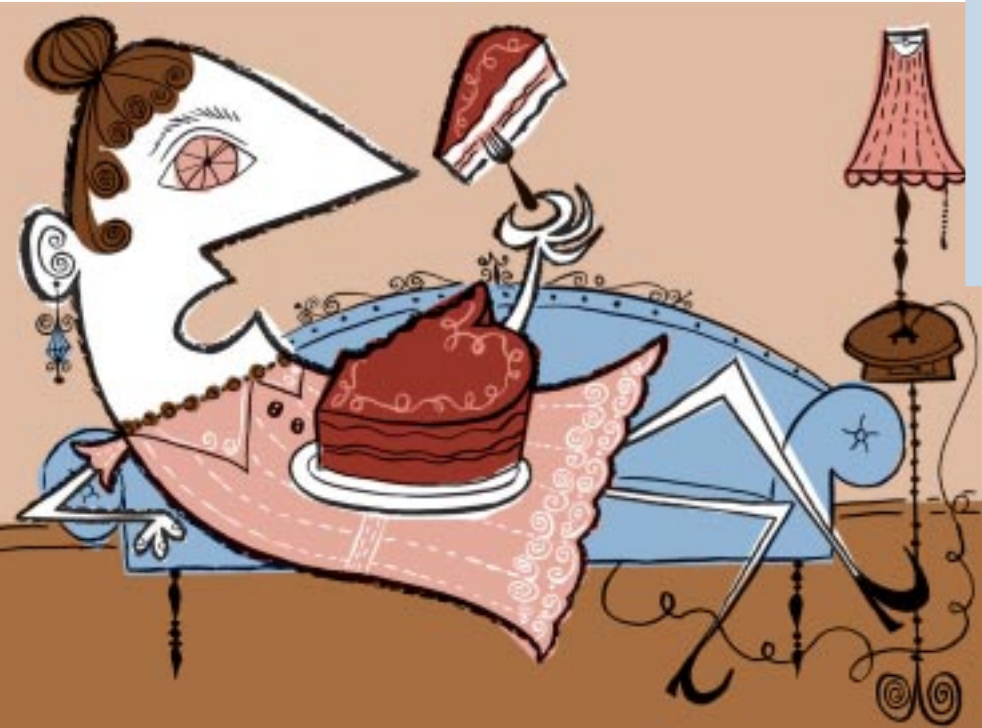


Feeding your feelings?

Recognizing emotional eating can keep weight-loss goals on track

BY KELLY RICE



MELINDA BECK

Despite the variety of diets available today, many of us feel at a loss to find one that really works long-term. The weight may come off steadily for a while, but sooner or later — perhaps after a goal weight has been met — the pounds creep steadily upward once again, leaving us to search for another diet that will “work better.”

What’s the answer? Believe it or not, more and more weight-loss experts are saying — stop dieting.

Understanding emotional eating

“If we believe that the issue is lack of willpower, then we have to conclude that we have a nation of wimps,” says Dilia De La Altagracia, author of *The End of Diets: Healing Emotional Hunger*. “As the current statistics indicate, two out of every three Americans are overweight.”

But, she says, as an immigrant to the United States, she can’t embrace that belief. “America was built by people who left the comfort of their homeland to seek a better future,” she explains. “We are not lazy people.”

Instead, she attributes our national obesity epidemic to an increasing tendency to use food to suppress emotions.

Once an emotional eater herself, De La Altagracia says she had it down to a science. “I craved chocolate for the blues, ice cream for loneliness, nachos and cheese for boredom, pizza for disappointment, coffee with lots of cream when I was tired, and anything crunchy for anxiety.”

She says that during her 14-year personal journey with this issue, she consulted a variety of experts in an attempt to find a permanent solution. “Psychiatrists gave me the chemical imbalance theory, medical doctors insisted on counting calories, geneticists talked about fat genes, and exercise gurus denounced couch potatoes.”

But it wasn’t until she got a handle on emotional eating that she was able to lose the weight and keep it off.

“People who don’t understand addictive behavior keep citing willpower,

exercise, and smaller portions as the solution to our national epidemic,” she says. “The reality is that if your coping mechanism is food, the issue is how to understand what is causing emotional discomfort, and secondly, how to effectively deal with that emotional discomfort instead of eating.”

Putting diets to rest

Carol Solomon, Ph.D., a psychologist and personal coach in the Chicago area, agrees, saying that the secret to overcoming emotional eating is identifying what you’re trying to cope with through food and learning to deal with it more directly.

The first step, she says, is awareness. “The next time you’re hit with the urge to eat, slow down, be present in your body, and ask yourself if you are physiologically hungry,” she advises. “If you discover that you’re not, go further and ask yourself how you’re feeling and what you need.”

Journaling, says Solomon, can be a helpful tool in this process. Not only can it help you organize your thoughts, it can also help you identify patterns and solutions, she says.

One journaling technique she recommends is using the stem, “I feel _____ because _____.” While this prompt will help you get the ball rolling in terms of connecting with yourself, she says it can also be helpful to make a list of other things you can do when you feel that way.

“Maybe you’re tired and need rest,” she illustrates. “Taking a nap or a hot bath are a few other ways to meet that need. The point is to develop a bigger repertoire of strategies to use when you’re confronted with certain emotions. When you eat in response to your feelings, your range of responses is narrow. To conquer emotional eating, you have to broaden them.”

Another key point, she says, is realizing it’s okay to have feelings —

5 TRAITS OF EMOTIONAL EATING

You may be an emotional eater if:

1. you experience sudden pangs of hunger (physical hunger happens gradually)
2. you crave a specific food and can’t imagine eating anything else
3. you feel like you need to eat immediately and can’t wait
4. you continue to eat after you feel full, or you eat absent-mindedly, eating a whole bag of chips, for instance, without realizing it
5. you feel guilty after eating

to give yourself permission to have whatever emotion you happen to have at the moment. “It may be painful,” she admits. “But it won’t shatter you. Let yourself feel the emotions, get support for them if necessary — it’s the only way to get through it.”

De La Altagracia agrees. “I believe that we have been socialized to think that we should be spared the discomfort of our emotions,” she says. “Consequently, when we are stressed out, we hit the vending machine or go outside and light up a cigarette.”

“It is learning to welcome the concept that having some emotional discomfort is part of being human,” she continues. When we realize that, she explains, we allow ourselves to truly experience our emotions, and as a result, we become more attuned with ourselves.

“In essence,” she explains further, “we get to intimately know ourselves, our likes, our dislikes, our triggers, what truly feeds our soul, our creativity, and what contributes to us as human beings.”

“That is not a diet,” she concludes. “It is a profound personal growth that ends the diet roller coaster.”

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