

Understanding Food Addiction and Steps You Can Take to Regain Control

Eating healthy and losing weight seems downright impossible for many people. Even with their best intentions, they repeatedly find themselves eating large amounts of unhealthy foods, despite knowing that it is causing them harm. Sometimes the overeating can be a result of not consuming enough calories earlier in the day. Skipping meals and limiting food intake to lose weight can trigger natural food cravings as the body needs fed to sustain itself into the evening. However, sometimes the overeating can be a result of an addiction to food.

What is Food Addiction?

Food addiction is defined as a physical and psychological dependence on certain foods similar to the way drug addicts are addicted to drugs. This is very similar to several other eating disorders, including binge eating disorder and compulsive overeating. Food addiction is a very serious problem and one of the main reasons why some people just can't control themselves around certain foods, no matter how hard they try. Food addiction can lead to serious health problems as well as low self-esteem, increased feelings of anxiety, increased irritability, emotional detachment or numbness, depression and suicidal ideation.

The Science

New discoveries have shown that processed foods high in sugar, fat and salt (i.e. foods made in a plant versus grown on a plant) can be biologically addictive. Experiments in animals and humans show that, for some people, the same reward and pleasure centers of the brain that are triggered by addictive drugs, like cocaine and heroin, are also activated by these foods. Once people experience the pleasure associated with increased dopamine transmission in the brain, they quickly feel the need to eat again. The reward signals from these foods may override other signals of fullness and satisfaction in the brain. As a result people keep eating even when they're not hungry. The foods that seem to be the most problematic include typical "junk foods," as well as foods that contain sugar and/or wheat.

Others believe that food addiction has more to do with how a person behaves around food, what they think about food, and the way habits are formed with food and not the food itself. Because food is often used as a way to cope with emotional matters or to celebrate milestones in life, theorists believe that the repetition of this behavior can breed an addiction. By using food as a means to deal with anxiety, stress, grief, and the like, the body becomes conditioned to crave that process to feel relief.

In reality it is probably a combination of many things- environmental factors (i.e. advertising or a candy jar on a coworkers desk), emotional factors (i.e. using food to sooth or celebrate) and the addictive properties of processed foods- that when added together often override our normal biological or psychological control mechanisms.

8 Symptoms of Food Addiction

Below are some common traits among people suffering from a food addiction:

1. You frequently crave certain foods, despite feeling full or just finishing a meal.

2. When you give in and start eating a food you were craving, you often find yourself eating much more than you intended to.
3. When you eat a food you were craving, you sometimes eat to the point of feeling excessively “stuffed.”
4. You often feel guilty after eating particular foods, yet find yourself eating them again soon after.
5. You often hide your consumption of unhealthy foods from others.
6. You feel unable to control your consumption of unhealthy foods, despite knowing that they are causing you physical harm (includes weight gain).
7. You spend a lot of the time feeling sluggish or lethargic from overeating.
8. Your behavior with respect to food and eating causes significant distress in your life.

How to Overcome Food Addiction

Recovering from a food addiction or an unhealthy relationship with food is a process but definitely worth the time and effort it takes to free yourself from food. It often requires a team approach in order to achieve a full recovery. Here are a few steps you can take to start developing a healthier relationship with food:

1. **Set Boundaries with Unsafe Foods.** Typically, trigger or “unsafe” foods are removed from the diet and boundaries are set so that managing these foods in a healthier way can be relearned. If someone binges on ice cream when he/she is stressed, it’s best not to keep it in the house. Eliminating the temptation until he/she can eat ice cream again in a balanced way is the best and only safe option. Many learn over time that moderation doesn’t work and abstinence is the only safe option as is the case with other addictions.
2. **Follow a Structured Meal Plan.** A person suffering from an unhealthy relationship with food can get on the right track to recovery by following a meal plan and normal eating pattern. This helps the person set safe boundaries with food and helps the person feel satisfied so that there is no physiological need to eat. It is more tempting to be out of control with food when there is physical deprivation.
3. **Learn Healthy Coping Strategies.** Keep a food and mood journal to help identify emotional reasons (anger, sadness, boredom, procrastination, etc.) for turning to food to cope. Then identify healthier coping mechanisms and strategies you can use to deal with your emotions instead of food. Because cravings are often short-lived, try setting a timer for 20 minutes and find something else to do before eating.
4. **Seek Professional Advice.** Beating a food addiction does not happen overnight; it often needs to involve a registered dietitian and licensed therapist that specialize in the area of disordered eating. These professionals will help a person suffering from food addiction implement appropriate strategies and can help provide accountability and sound advice.

Recovering from a food addiction is achievable. If you are a loved one is suffering, share this article, provide reassurance and encourage him or her to find professional support.