



# EMOTIONAL EATING

## WIRED TO EAT

Boredom, loneliness, anger, anxiety... these are just a few of the negative emotions we experience in daily life. When faced with a difficult or uncomfortable feeling, many of us may turn to food for comfort. Why are we so drawn to foods we know aren't good for us or will make us feel worse later on? As it turns out, much of this comes down to the way our brains are hardwired.

### IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD

When we experience stress, our brain releases a hormone called cortisol to help our body adapt. Cortisol can lead to an increase in appetite and cravings for high-calorie foods. When we consume foods high in fat, salt, sugar, and refined carbs, they can temporarily make us feel better by activating our brain's reward centre. Chocolate, for example, can increase feelings of satisfaction and decrease tension in the body. Sugar provides a quick source of energy and releases opioids - feel-good neurotransmitters in the brain - in much the same way certain drugs do. Salt has been shown to increase feelings of pleasure by releasing dopamine in the brain, while refined carbohydrates produce another neurotransmitter, serotonin, known for its calming effect. In this way, food becomes a form of self-medication.



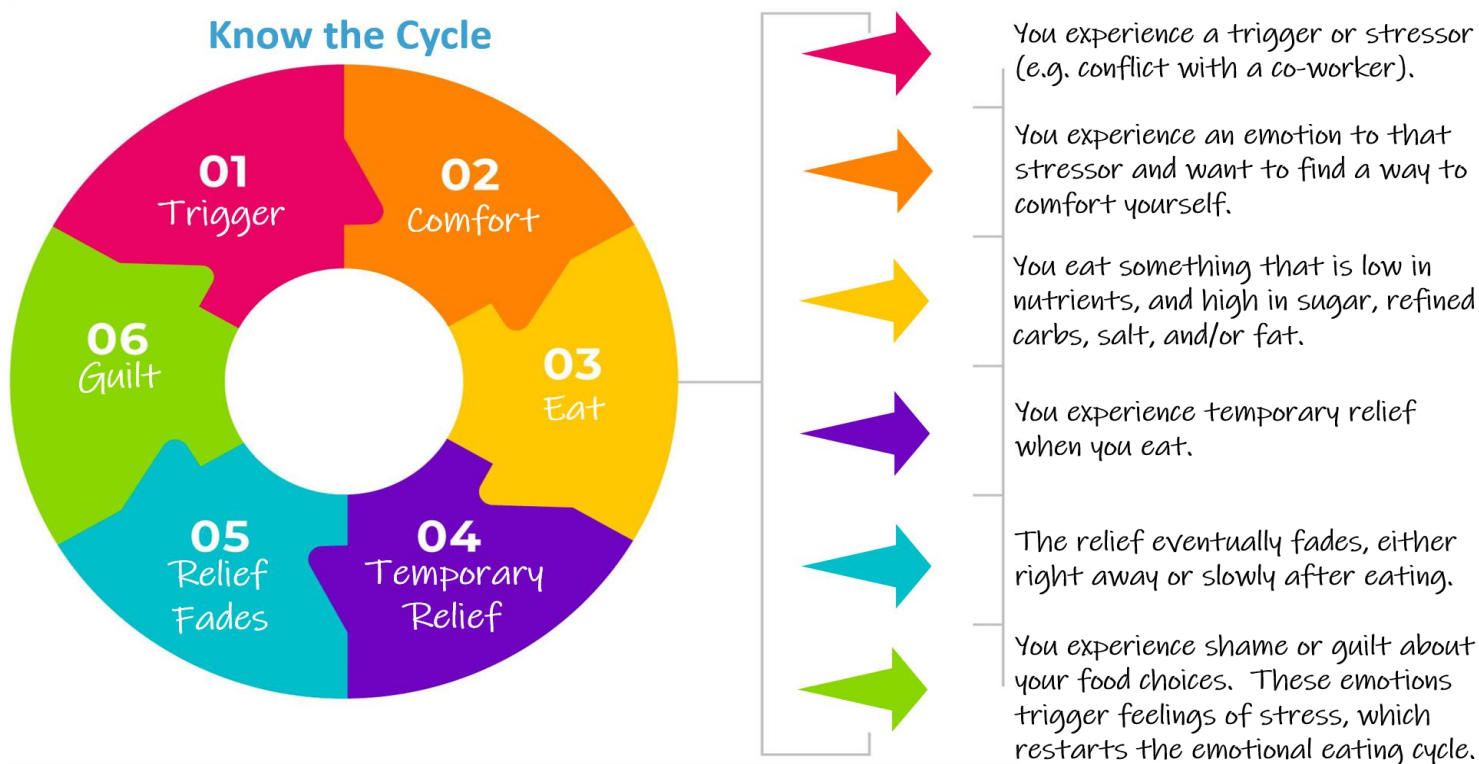
### FOOD ASSOCIATIONS

The power our favourite foods have over us may also be due to the associations we make with these foods. For example, a family gathering surrounded by loved ones and delicious food can create associations of love and belongingness, which might unconsciously cause a person to link these feelings with food. These associations can bring up feelings of comfort and security, something all human beings are wired to seek out, but especially in times of uncertainty and stress.

## IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT

Wouldn't it be nice if we craved bowls of salad and quinoa rather than processed, high-calorie foods? There's a reason why we don't! Once upon a time, in our prehistoric days, humans weren't worried about consuming too many calories. Instead, survival was the name of the game. We wanted to get our hands on all the fat and sugar we could. Our ancestors were primed to crave fatty, starchy, and sweet foods because it meant survival. The surplus of calories not needed for immediate energy would be stored as fat in the body and could be used later in times of famine and low food supply.

Today, most of us do not have to worry about famine, but we still have the wiring of our hunter-gatherer ancestors. Furthermore, stressful situations can bring on stronger cravings because our brains are wired to associate stress with a lack of resources (namely food). While this instinct was adaptive thousands of years ago due to food scarcity, today it has led to the epidemic of obesity and chronic disease.



## BREAK THE CYCLE

Not all hope is lost! Although these cravings are hardwired, we can train our brains to begin making new associations with other pleasurable experiences. Things like sipping on warm tea, taking a walk, reading, or playing your favourite board game can target the pleasure centres of the brain the same way food does. The best way to break any habit is to have a substitute to replace it with. Make a list and find what works for you!



Sources: <https://www.medicinenet.com>  
<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/diets/emotional-eating.htm>  
[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/fat-cravings\\_n\\_960463](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/fat-cravings_n_960463)  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/science-choice/201609/5-reasons-why-we-crave-comfort-foods>  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/why-bad-looks-good/201811/does-comfort-food-really-make-you-feel-good>  
 Images by Freepik.com