



THE EMOTIONAL DIET

by Cat Thompson

Food. It can bring us such intense pleasure, or, if we are at war with our cravings, such intense pain. How does food get to be so important in our lives, and what can we do to achieve a life where our relationship with it leaves us content and peaceful?

Food is Life

Food is a basic survival mechanism. Without food, we will die. You might say it is the foundation of our lives. That being said, at some point breaking our day into eating three meals was an important way to sustain our lifestyles. When we physically worked long, hard hours to survive and spent tremendous energy each day, it was important to begin the day with lots of fuel, break in the middle of the day to rest and rejuvenate with food, and then end the day with fuel to sustain our bodies through the evening. For many of us, it wasn't that long ago that our families were serfs turning over the majority of our food to landlords. Hunger was the norm, and food represented wealth and abundance.

These days we are still eating as though we were laborers in the field, yet most of us are not able to handle the continuous amounts of food we put into our bodies. Our systems become overloaded, overworked and eventually break down. Eating as often as we do and as much as we do while sitting most of the day creates a surplus that our bodies struggle to assimilate. In addition, much of the processed food we are eating has very little nutritional value. This causes us to crave more food as our bodies try to take in adequate nutrients. And that can lead to some nasty feelings of self-hatred as we watch our bodies bloat, age and rebel.

The Structure of Nourishment

Structure is an important part of our existence. We are most comfortable when we have consistent structures that we can depend on. Eating is a structure. We can build our lives around three meals a day. As children, mealtime was an important part of our family structure. Meals generally happened at the same time each day, involved our families, provided us with nourishment and feelings of belonging to a tribe. As we get older and our physical and emotional needs change, we may find ourselves reverting back to this 3-meal structure even if we live alone, or aren't hungry. That may be because it is the **ritual** of eating we are craving – the rich experience of sharing ourselves with others at mealtimes. If we do not understand that craving and create new food structures, we may find ourselves dissatisfied with every eating experience, yet never feel full enough to stop.



In order to better understand the subconscious factors that may be motivating our eating habits, we need to remember how we spent our formative years with food, and what the relationship was between food and family.

The Feelings of Food

Many of us are drawn to food for specific emotional memories they carry. If, for example, our families used certain types of food to reward us or to celebrate something special, eating that particular food may bring a sense of peace or connection that we are missing. If we were given sweets to compensate for our parent's busy schedule, we may associate sweet food with love and caring. If eating a large meal with meat, vegetables and dessert was how we shared time with our families each day, we may find ourselves going out to dinner at the all-you-can-eat buffet as a way of re-invoking the feeling of being connected to our tribal community. Food generally plays an important role in how we define ourselves in the context of our family life. If we grew up in a house where the family did not eat meals together, and our food choices consisted of what was in the refrigerator at the moment, we may find eating with others uncomfortable and distressing, thereby triggering us to find ways to eat our meals alone. If food was scarce, and we were often hungry, eating may represent abundance to us, and we may be driven to continuous eating so as to avoid any memories of emptiness. Food can evoke tremendous feelings in our subconscious that can overtake any conscious structure we might try to install as adults.



Is it time for my treat?



As we look for the patterns that may be affecting our food choices, paying attention to the time of day we are drawn to binge or make unhealthy food choices is important. For example, let's say that you crave sweets an hour or two before bedtime. And not just crave them - you're downright obsessed with having something sweet in the evening. Looking at your childhood patterns may show that early evening was the time of day when you got your parent's undivided attention and affection. Washing up for bed, reading a bedtime story, saying prayers with you - these may have been ways your parents were connecting intimately with you - and for some, it may have been the only intimate connection we had with our parents. If today, you do not have a supportive bedtime structure that provides that same quality of intimacy, you may find yourself turning to ice cream or chocolate instead.

Did your family all help prepare meals together? If so, food in the context of personal relationships may have a much higher emotional charge for you than it does for your partner or your children. You may feel hurt or angry that your family shows no interest in participating during meal preparation. Often, as adults we remember certain parts of food prep with fondness, and carry a desire to recreate that experience with our own families. If they have little or no desire to participate with us, we may find ourselves jumping between what we long to create and the reality of what we are experiencing in the moment. This can create drama in our meal structures, and if drama is missing from our lives, food dramas may become addictive.



How many of you were "treated" with dessert after a meal, particularly a meal you were sure you weren't going to like? Your parents might have started the "dessert for reward" to get you to eat new foods. Unfortunately, it may have left you with a strong, subconscious imprint that dessert was the best part of your meal. If you then deny yourself dessert, you may find that you lose your enjoyment of eating altogether.

What about those morning donuts? Do you crave sweets first thing, before you even get to work? If so, chances are your body is begging for balance. Often when we are in a structure that is out of balance – our physical body is not getting enough activity, our emotional lives are barren, or our social lives nonexistent – we crave sugar in the morning as a way to start our day out with the sweetness of life. Yet those morning sweets can send us on a downward spiral that culminates with exhaustion by day's end.



Filler up!!

There is another, more subtle component to overeating. When our lives are rich with meaningful relationships, when we feel valued and believe our contributions are making the world a better place, we feel full. This fullness is felt in our center, where our stomach is. When we are not full of the satisfaction that comes from meaningful existence, we may carry a sense of emptiness in our center. We may then we are drawn to fill that space, often at any cost. For some, it is



through drugs or certain addictive behaviors. For others, it is through food. This pattern often shows up at family gatherings. Have you ever been to a social event with your family and felt ravenous? This is often due to the fact that relationships with our families may be unsatisfying. If we long to have more meaningful and authentic relationships, and don't know how to achieve that, our feelings of dissatisfaction may intensify, causing unease in our center and demanding instant attention. If we are not conscious of

what this feeling indicates, we may interpret it as a signal for food, and overeat even when we are not hungry. Food can distract us, fill us up and change our feelings.

In a related pattern, we often begin relationships around food. "Everyone has to eat," a friend of mine said to me, "so let's get together and catch up over lunch". This sounds like an efficient plan at first glance. What often happens next (particularly in new relationships) is the feelings of excitement or infatuation are now tied into the act of eating together. And as the relationship progresses, there is always a place we get to where we are uncomfortable with each other. I remember many times being out to dinner, observing couples who didn't speak or look at each other throughout their entire meals. I would shudder and think, "I hope I never get to that place". Each time I DID get to that place, I realized that the PROCESS of eating had taken the place of the authentic dialogue we began with. I have since changed my relationships – I generally only eat with someone who I have not seen for a long time, thereby assuring that we will actually visit during our meal. With my closer friends, I prefer playing to eating.

Breaking the chains of compulsion

So how do we break eating patterns that are unhealthy? Many of us have been in that place of trying to control our eating patterns; imposing rigid disciplines around what we can and can't eat, building structures to make sure we aren't tempted by the foods we crave, avoiding social situations where we might fall off the wagon – and frankly, battling our desires like that takes an enormous amount of energy and often leaves life dreary and hard. Let's look at some other ways we might change our patterns.

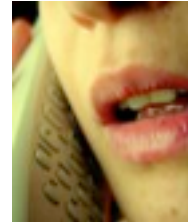


1. If you crave a specific food, and find yourself battling that craving, ask yourself what other desires you might have that are not being fulfilled. Our food cravings can often mask a deeper longing for something more meaningful. For example, if your body has a strong desire for physical exercise, and you have not honored that (due to time constraints in your work, no gym close by, etc.), then it is highly possible that your desire to exercise will look for something else to fill that need. Chocolate in particular imparts many of the same feelings to the body that physical exertion does – the satisfaction, however, does not last nearly as long!! So, ask yourself if that particular food addiction might be a second choice craving. See if you can track down the first choice craving (exercise, touch, intimacy, etc.).



2. Are you rewarding yourself with food? Do you use food to change the way you feel? Write your feelings down (and be brutally honest with yourself about what you are feeling). See if your food cravings change after you've expressed your inner turmoil. Pay attention to the time of day that your cravings strike and see if there is a correlation with some childhood pattern.

3. Get a food buddy. Make a deal that you will call each other when your food craving hits and talk about what's going on with you right then and there that could be triggering your compulsion. You may see a pattern unfolding – like each time you have a certain experience, a certain feeling appears and you crave a certain food. Once you find the root cause of a pattern, it will often change on its own, and for sure will lose some of its power just by being revealed.



4. Observe your eating patterns when you are with groups. Are those patterns different than when alone? Do different groups trigger different eating patterns? If being with your family makes you overeat, it might be interesting to see if changing the dynamic you have with them will change your food cravings. Start by meeting with one family member and initiate some authentic conversation, perhaps around what kind of relationship you truly desire with that person, and how you would be willing to create that. Then see if the family gatherings take on a richer and juicier flavor without the food preoccupation.



Food is life. We cannot live without it. Feelings allow us to know we are alive. We may be able to live without feelings; we will not be able to live well without them. When you are able to see the ways your feelings connect with your food choices, you are well on the way to creating a life that feeds and sustains you with joy and ease.

Sidebar: Am I really hungry?

The first step to changing eating patterns is to understand them. Next time you reach for that snack, ask yourself: Am I truly hungry? Do I feel afraid? Am I nervous about something? Am I bored? Am I rewarding myself for something I've completed? Stop and ask yourself if you know the “why” of your patterns. You can still have it - knowing why you're eating it will bring an awareness that can be the first step towards dismantling unconscious patterns.