



# Are You an Emotional (Stress) Eater? What to Do Instead.

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We all have moments when we are under an increased amount of stress. Everyone has different ways to deal with it. In the past, my coping strategy was stress eating -- gorging on non-nutritious comfort foods such as pizza, ice cream, or fast food, to satisfy my emotional needs, rather than my physical hunger.

When my Mom passed away a number of years ago, I gained over 50 pounds because I was in a high state of stress for many months. In addition to the weight gain, my overeating and consumption of too many non-nutritious comfort foods increased my stress levels. This is because most comfort foods are inflammatory and add more stress to an already stressed body. One of the problems is that when we are stressed we are more likely to do things unconsciously (mindlessly) which means we end up eating unconsciously.

**Here are some things you can do when you are in the middle of stressful times.**

- 1. Don't hide from difficult emotions.** When my Mom died, I wasn't dealing with my grief. I stuffed my emotions down with food. Once I got help from a grief counselor and started dealing with my emotions, my eating quickly returned back to normal. Bottom line: If you are under continued stress and turning to food for comfort, ask for help.

2. **Ask yourself: “Can I change my situation?”** Some stressful situations cannot be avoided but many can. Is it possible to walk away from a stressful situation? Is it something you created and can un-create?
3. **Practice mindfulness and breathing exercises.** Stress eating is a form of mindlessness. You are eating unconsciously and barely even noticing. Mindfulness is about bringing yourself back to your present moment. This is where your emotions lie so practicing mindfulness or doing breathing exercises might bring the emotions up. If the emotions come up and out then you are less likely to stress eat.
4. **Find comfort foods that are healthy and enjoyable.** Over the years, I have discovered many foods that are delicious, nutritious, and comforting. I love spinach pie, Greek salad, and sweet potatoes topped with yogurt. They have become comfort foods to me yet are also healthy and satisfying. Discover your healthy comfort foods and keep them in your kitchen when you need them.
5. **Have alternatives to unhealthy snacks.** When I am feeling stressed I will eat almost anything that is put in front of me. If there are M&M’s and fluffernutter sandwiches I would gladly dig in. On the other hand, if there are fruits and nuts in front of me I will eat that. Try to have healthy alternatives at work and home for when you are feeling stressed and desiring to eat anything that is in front of you.
6. **Forgive yourself.** Dealing with stress is hard. There can be all sorts of emotions involved such as anger, sadness, and anxiety. If you find yourself dealing with stress by overeating or turning to unhealthy favorites like potato chips, Twinkies, and pepperoni pizzas then it is vitally important to realize you have been going through a tough time. Forgive yourself. Without the guilt of your past food infractions, you will be much more likely to eat healthy in the future.

These are some of the tools that have helped me through stressful times. What has worked for you?

