

Tips for Managing Stress Eating

Courtney Luecking, Dietetics and Human Nutrition, and Emily DeWitt, Family and Consumer Sciences

Have you ever had a bad day and find yourself reaching for a bag of chips or a pack of cookies? Then, suddenly, you realize the chips or cookies are nearly gone? Eating is one of the many ways we cope with negative emotions. According to an article in *Health Psychology*, stress eating is just that: “eating in response to acute or chronic stress or in response to negative emotional states” such as sadness or anger. Research confirms stress can cause some people to eat more and others to eat less. Some will reach for salty foods, and others will reach for sweets. No matter how stress affects your eating patterns, you are not alone. In a 2014 report from the Stress in America survey, 33 percent of adults said in the past month, stress caused them to eat unhealthy foods or overeat. In the same report, 30 percent of adults said they skipped a meal because of stress.

Why do I feel like eating all the cookies and chips?

The urge to stress eat is normal. The foods we eat and the moods and emotions we experience are closely linked. The reasons we feel stressed will vary depending on our seasons of life, yet our bodies respond in similar ways. It is harder to make nutritious choices when we are under a lot of stress because stress interferes with our ability to regulate emotions and control our behaviors (Figure 1).

The body’s stress response system causes a carefully choreographed sequence of changes to hormones and normal bodily functions known as the “fight or flight” response. The fight or flight response allows us to face or flee our stressors in tense moments. These higher-than-normal levels of stress hormones can increase our desire to eat foods higher in sugar, sodium, fat, and calories, often



Figure 1. Stress affects our mind, body, behavior, and emotions.

referred to as “palatable foods.” Cortisol, one of the most well-known stress hormones, can increase our appetites and promote increased eating. Over time, high levels of cortisol can affect our metabolism and alter our bodies, causing fat to be stored in our abdomen, which can lead to weight gain and obesity in some individuals.

Stress also interferes with our body’s reward systems. Our brains have reward systems that motivate us, help us learn, and prompt pleasurable feelings. As a result, these systems influence our behaviors. Think about your favorite comfort foods. How does thinking about those foods make you feel? Eating, or even thinking about eating, smelling, or seeing food, can activate reward systems and motivate us to eat, even when we are not hungry. Tasty foods are particularly rewarding, which is why we find ourselves often reaching for them when stressed. The pleasurable feelings can override the body’s fullness cues and lead us to overeat.

There is some evidence that eating tasty foods can reduce signs of stress, anxiety, or other negative feelings. However, these effects are usually temporary. Over time, these foods can have the opposite effect on mood and health and create a cycle of negative emotion, eating, and temporary relief, followed by negative emotions again. Finding other ways to manage stress can ward off cycles of stress eating.

Stress Eating Management Toolbox

Each person is different, each stressful situation is different, and thus, each response will be different. Having a toolbox of options for working through stress can help us find what works best in that moment.

Gain awareness.

To do something different, we first need to understand what we are currently doing. Keep a journal—written or electronic—to identify sources of stress and monitor patterns of behavior in your life. Think like a detective and only include facts – keep it judgment-free. To get started, track answers to the following questions.

- What does it feel like when I am stressed?
- What causes me stress?
- Why do I eat?
- When do I eat?
- Where do I eat?
- What do I eat? How much?

Remember to keep your responses free of judgment. For example, only write down how much you ate (a pint of ice cream), not feelings about the amount (I was “bad” for eating so much ice cream).

Take time to pause.

Before grabbing food, try doing something else that you enjoy. The activity provides an opportunity to release energy, process emotions, and time to decide whether to eat. Ideas for stress-relieving activities can be found in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Ideas for stress-relieving activities.

Manage your time.

Think about planning stress relief opportunities into your day, especially at the times of day when you are most prone to stress eating. For example, if you find yourself stress eating late at night, try reading a book or journaling about your day.

Express gratitude.

Experiencing uncomfortable feelings is part of being human. Gratitude is one way to enhance our well-being and shift our mindset. In fact, gratitude can help us more effectively manage difficult situations and emotions. In moments of stress, take time to reflect and write down three things you are thankful for or tell someone how they helped you. For longer term benefits, create a daily appreciation practice. This could include starting a journal to write down good things, big or small, that happen each day or a routine of sharing something you are thankful for before a meal.

Stay hydrated.

We can feel sluggish or like we are in a fog if we have not gotten enough fluids. Drinking water or other unsweet-

ened beverages throughout the day—such as unsweetened tea, flavored water, or milk—will help you stay hydrated.

Manage caffeine intake.

Caffeine is a stimulant that can amplify symptoms of anxiety. If you are sensitive to caffeine, avoid drinking large amounts of coffee, soda, or energy drinks. Also consider limiting caffeine to earlier in the day, as this is less likely to disrupt sleep.

Prioritize sleep.

Most of us do not get enough high-quality sleep. Sleep is a time for our bodies to rest and repair. When we are sleep-deprived, we can feel sluggish, our hormones can be out of sync, and this can lead to additional stress in our lives. The National Sleep Foundation recommends adults get seven to nine hours of sleep each night. Try creating a relaxing pre-bedtime routine and sticking to a consistent bedtime and waking time schedule.

Eat regularly.

How much, how often, and what we eat influences our blood sugar levels. Changes in blood sugar levels, particularly a drop in blood sugar, affect our mood and desire to eat. Eating regularly throughout the day can help keep blood sugar levels stable and reduce the urge to stress eat. Choose a variety of foods. Whole fruit, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, low-fat dairy, and healthy fats from nuts and seeds can prevent drastic changes in blood sugar levels. Limit foods high in added sugars and saturated fats, which we typically find in those comfort foods we seek.

Tips for When You Choose to Enjoy Comfort Foods

We will always crave comfort foods. It is important to create space to enjoy these foods without guilt or shame. There are several ways we can enjoy the foods that bring us comfort while also being mindful of the experience.

Own it and enjoy it.

Give yourself grace and space to enjoy the foods that bring you joy.

Check in with yourself.

Consider how you feel, how hungry you are, and what emotions you are feeling. Ask yourself if eating the comfort food is bringing you pleasure. If not, accept that it is OK to put the food down and move onto something else.

Eliminate distractions.

Take food out of the package and put it in a bowl or on a plate. Have a seat at a table, rather than on the couch, the

bed, or in the car. Turn off screens and allow yourself to be an active participant in the meal or snack. By tuning out distractions, we can tune into the experience of eating our favorite comfort foods.

Savor the experience.

As you eat, take time to engage all your senses. What does the food look like on your plate? What does it smell like? What sounds do you hear as you chew and swallow? What flavors do you taste? What does the food feel like in your hands or mouth? How do you feel while eating it?

Conclusion

While stress eating is a normal response to uncomfortable feelings, it only provides temporary relief to the stressful situation. Over time, stress eating may cause a cycle of uncomfortable feelings and lead to more stress eating. Create a toolbox of options to manage your stress and savor comfort foods to keep stress eating in check.



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