

PART ONE

# The Learning Sessions

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# 1

## Emotional Eating 101

I've been on a constant diet for the last two decades. I've lost a total of 789 pounds. By all accounts, I should be hanging from a charm bracelet.—*Erma Bombeck*

Take any moment in time, focus the camera lens on your neighborhood, and look closely. You'll find dozens of people—maybe even hundreds or thousands—breaking their diets no matter when you check. Every one of those well-intentioned dieters woke up in the morning determined to stick to an eating plan, but by afternoon had one hand on a piece of chocolate and the other on their forehead, wondering why, why on earth they had no willpower. In fact, you might be one of those people.

It's no secret that extra pounds can shorten your life. Studies show that up to 83 percent of diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease can be prevented by proper diet and exercise. Obesity can diminish your energy level, interfere with social success, and even reduce earnings, as a recent study that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* showed. The study measured overall wealth at age thirty-nine

for 2,000 people who had been followed since adolescence. Those with a normal weight had twice as much accumulated wealth.

So why can't you reach your weight goals, knowing these things?

As I said in the Introduction, you have installed food as a psychological coping mechanism in addition to being a source of nutrition.

My patient Allison recently told me, "My dependence on food started as a preteen. If I came home sad, my mother told me, 'Eat, it'll make you feel better.' I didn't have weight problems very early on in life but I was pushed to eat, eat. As a teenager, food became my friend.

"One day when I was sixteen, I found out that my boyfriend had cheated on me with this bitchy girl, Linda. I remember crying on the couch and my mom making me a huge ice cream sundae and spoon-feeding it to me. And yes, if you can believe it, I still want ice cream now whenever I feel blue. When my divorce from Tad became final last month, I went right out to Cold Stone Creamery. I know I eat to avoid emotions."

Using food to deal with emotions as Linda did is called *emotional eating*. A study I conducted of 17,000 failed dieters showed that virtually all of them relapsed because of emotional issues, mostly related to self-esteem or emotional hurt. They were doing really well on their diets, and then their husband started having an affair, or they lost their job, or a parent got sick. Perhaps you had a similar kind of thing trip up your diet efforts in the past.

One thing I've learned is that attacking emotional hunger by counting calories is almost like trying to run a marathon while lying on your couch. It just doesn't make any sense. You need to go deep within to control emotional hunger, because as real as the hunger feels, it originates in your mind, not in your belly.

Roxy, a forty-five-year-old mother of three, reported that she ate a whole box of donuts after a frustrating afternoon at the mall with her sixteen-year-old daughter. She said to me, "I was so mad at her, what else could I do?" This very intelligent woman couldn't think of even one other option, in spite of my prompting and questioning.

Her pattern of stuffing down feelings by stuffing in food was so deeply ingrained in her mind that it short-circuited her common sense. Roxy had lost her ability to think clearly and constructively about a charged emotional issue, another indication of emotional eating. She didn't need a box of donuts to satisfy her physical hunger, but she thought she did. She thought donuts were the only way to dial down her anger and frustration and to rid herself of angry thoughts toward her daughter.

Roxy and Allison have a few things in common.

1. They overate to suppress feelings.
2. They chose comfort food (not broccoli) and felt guilty about it.
3. They short-circuited their best problem-solving abilities.

These three behaviors describe emotional eating in a nutshell.

Let's start with a simple quiz to determine if you are in fact an emotional eater, someone who uses food to cope with life.

## Are You an Emotional Eater?

To find out if you're an emotional eater, answer the following seven questions.

The last time you ate too much:

1. Did you notice your hunger coming on fast, or did it grow gradually?
2. When you got hungry, did you feel an almost desperate need to eat something right away?
3. When you ate, did you pay attention to what went in your mouth, or did you just stuff it in?
4. When you got hungry, would any nutritious food have sufficed, or did you need a certain type of food or treat to satisfy yourself?

5. Did you feel guilty after you ate?
6. Did you eat when you were emotionally upset or experiencing feelings of “emptiness”?
7. Did you stuff in the food very quickly?

Let's see how you did.

1. Emotional hunger comes on suddenly, while physical hunger develops slowly. Physical hunger begins with a tummy rumble, then it becomes a stronger grumble, and finally it evolves into hunger pangs, but it's a slow process, very different from emotional hunger, which has a sudden, dramatic onset.
2. Unlike physical hunger, emotional hunger demands food immediately, and it wants immediate satisfaction. Physical hunger, on the other hand, will wait for food.
3. A difference between physical and emotional hunger involves mindfulness. To satisfy physical hunger, you normally make a deliberate choice about what you consume, and you maintain awareness of what you eat. You notice how much you put in your mouth so that you can stop when you're full. Emotional hunger, in contrast, rarely notices what's being eaten. If you have emotional hunger, you'll want more food even after you're stuffed.
4. Emotional hunger often demands particular foods in order to be fulfilled. If you're physically hungry, even carrots will look delicious. If you're emotionally hungry, however, only cake or ice cream or your particular preferred indulgence will seem appealing.
5. Emotional hunger often results in guilt or promises to do better next time. Physical hunger has no guilt attached to it, because you know you ate in order to maintain health and energy.
6. Emotional hunger results from some emotional trigger. Physical hunger results from a physiological need.

7. When you are feeding physical hunger, you can eat your food and savor each bite, but when you eat to fulfill emotional hunger you stuff the food in. All of a sudden you look down and the whole pint of ice cream is gone.

## The Real Reason You're So Hungry— Phantom Hunger

When I buy cookies I eat just four and throw the rest away. But first I spray them with Raid so I won't dig them out of the garbage later. Be careful, though, because that Raid really doesn't taste that bad.—*Janette Barber*

Did your answers to the seven questions above reveal that you might be an emotional eater? Did you discover that you've been confusing emotional hunger with real, biological hunger? If so, the first question becomes—why?

You eat when you aren't really hungry because you have two stomachs—one real, the other phantom. The hunger in your belly signals you when your system has a biological requirement for food. If that was the only signal of hunger you received, you'd be thin. It's the phantom stomach that causes the problems. The phantom stomach sends out a signal demanding food when unruly emotions and unsolved personal agendas start pushing themselves into awareness and you feel compelled to eat, or more accurately to stuff yourself and shut the feelings up. Phantom hunger has such power that it drives you to almost any lengths to satisfy it. You'll drive to a convenience store in the middle of the night for snacks; you'll steal your child's Halloween candy when she's asleep; you'll sneak and hide food.

My patient Danielle described an episode of phantom hunger on a typical weekend: "The minute my husband left the house to play golf I found myself getting 'hungry' when I knew I wasn't. I tried to

put eating off: I took the dog for a walk, I went in the hot tub . . . but the entire time I only thought of what I could be making, what I could be eating. I checked the fridge I don't know how many times, and then the pantry . . . then the fridge. Three cookies, some spoonfuls of ice cream, slices of cheese, a handful of cashews, five more cookies, the rest of the pack. Then I sat in front of the TV and wham—I'm 'hungry' again. Every time the show stopped and a commercial came on, I wanted something else to eat."

Danielle didn't know what to do with herself when she was alone. Sound familiar, or do you have other triggers that drive you to the cupboard? All emotional eaters have particular issues they want to avoid facing, and when those issues arise, the phantom belly growls with insistent urgency and suddenly you find yourself powerless over the urge to eat.

### *What Triggers Your Phantom Hunger?*

There are two categories of things that trigger phantom hunger. The first includes situations, places, or events. Perhaps you overeat when you have to attend staff meetings at your pathetic job, or when you go to family functions. For some people, it's funerals or restaurants or sports events. For others, it's a boring day at work.

The second category that triggers phantom hunger includes people. For you, it's probably a specific person—your boss, parent, spouse, or child—who triggers you to overeat. They may trigger you with a glance, a word, or even with their silence, but whatever it is, when you're around them, you're sure to overeat.

My patient Bonnie eats when she has a deadline at work. Last month, when she had a grant proposal due, she ate two large bags of chips in one day and drank four cans of soda; the next day, she had five candy bars. She gained eleven pounds in one month.

Florence, on the other hand, deals well with work pressure, but she binges late at night when her husband, Barney, doesn't come home. "I feel like I have no control," she tells me. "I get so anxious, and all I can think about is having some cake. It's always something sweet I want, and starchy, like cake or cookies or a scone. I almost



get the shakes, and then I eat, and then I want something else, just to fight off the anxiety.”

In other words, phantom hunger is the hunger that’s created when a person feels uncomfortable.

## How You Originally Got Hooked on Food

If you do have an emotional eating pattern, you might wonder where it came from. Did you become an emotional eater because you have extraordinary problems or some genetic coding gone awry? Probably not. Emotional eating is the norm at birth for all of us. When a mother feeds her baby, the baby stops crying because food soothes. Babies equate the mother’s milk with survival, love, and peace of mind. When babies don’t get mother’s milk, they may settle for a substitute—a bottle or a pacifier, for instance. The pacifier has no warmth, taste, or nutritional value, but it’s close enough to that primal experience to soothe the infant. It’s natural for infants to continuously seek comfort from the mother’s soothing presence, and easy enough, later in life, to make food the substitute pathway back to that comforting state of mind.

The first, and primal, regulator of your mood was your mother. If your needs for food and comfort were met, then you will often equate that comfort on some level with food. And if you were neglected in some way by your caregivers, food and love will be linked and you’ll find yourself craving food when what you really want is love.

As you grew up you had to learn to regulate your own moods and handle stressful situations, away from your mother, without the immediacy of food or her love. You had to develop the mental skill to handle your interior life as an autonomous being. If you still use food as an artificial quick switch to stop feeling bad and start feeling good, you’ve not yet completed this essential task of human development. You want to be independent, but perhaps you also fear or resist it. You’ll learn more about this ambivalence later in this book.

Although decades have passed since infancy, you still have a sense-memory left over from this buried part of your past, so that even now, eating actually changes the state of your mind, at least temporarily. When you feel anxious, eating “compresses” the anxiety, almost as if it’s dialing down the volume. Overeating actually works. It soothes you in times of distress, and that’s the dilemma. But as you know, the comfort doesn’t last for long, because once the food is finished, the self-hatred starts.

You probably adopted food as a method to cope with uncomfortable feelings at some point in your development, when in an effort to return to the safety of infancy, you started overeating. Perhaps it was when your parents separated, or when you changed schools, or when you came home after school to an empty house, or when you went off to college, or had your first child.

For Marcia, overeating started after her family moved. “I was about eleven years old,” she says. “I had just moved from the Bronx in New York to Queens, and I did not have any new friends. I would tell my parents I needed like four dollars for this special typing paper—and would go to the little grocery store and buy Twinkies, Wise potato chips, and as many other snacks as I could afford and hide them in my backpack. I would binge on cake or cookies my mother would bake and lie, saying I needed to bring them to school. I was missing some sort of attention and my old friends, I imagine, at the time it started. But I just got fat, without getting friends.”

Cocaine addicts keep using cocaine because they long for the feeling of their first high, but it’s something they’ll never be able to get, just like Marcia couldn’t go home again by eating ice cream and cake. You can’t return to the comfort of infancy no matter how much food you eat.

Some of my patients say that eating puts them into a bubble where all their worries seem to disappear, much like the state that babies experience when they nurse. Others tell me that eating makes them feel insulated and protected instead of vulnerable and raw, which is like being held close to your mother’s chest. You use food, whether consciously or unconsciously, to numb the mind so you don’t have to deal with issues you’d rather not confront. I call

the altered state of mind where food transports us a “food trance,” something I’ll expand upon later. It’s a very important factor in the story of compulsive eating.

If you overeat when you feel distress in order to change your state of mind, then food has become your substitute for that mother–child bliss. Certainly, when you go to the vending machine when you just can’t deal with your workday you aren’t thinking about cuddling with Mom, but that’s the unconscious origin of the urge to overeat, and it’s as primal as can be. In psychological terms, food has become a love object. Separating you from your food is like yanking the child out of the arms of her mother; destroying your private, secret sanctuary; and exposing you to the unending turmoil of life. No wonder you hold onto your emotional eating pattern with such tenacity—the alternative is too frightening. It makes perfect sense!

## Why Is Emotional Eating So Hard to Stop?

Inside some of us is a thin person struggling to get out, but they can usually be sedated with a few pieces of chocolate cake.

—*Anonymous*

Basically, all diet plans and fitness programs advise you to just cut back or choose what you eat according to some logical plan. These strategies imply that you can consciously control your eating habits, choose alfalfa sprouts instead of ice cream, and deal with life’s problems straight on. For emotional eaters, however, this simply isn’t possible; the urge to eat is too strong. Food has become a psychological tool, a way to avoid feelings that are too intense or anxiety-provoking. If you haven’t learned how to cope with your life and your emotions in a way that doesn’t include food, you will not be able to adhere to any diet plan for very long. While things are going smoothly in your life you may be able to stick to your diet, but when

life presents a challenge you'll inevitably turn back to your old faithful fix, food.

Using food to deal with feelings, however, creates a vicious cycle. Food lets you avoid your problems or what's bothering you for a while, but when problems are left unattended they grow in intensity. This makes you stuff yourself and then you're filled with guilt on top of your original problem, and the cycle spirals out of control because then you need food to deal with the guilt as well as the original problem. Sure, food can serve as a fabulous quick fix, it can bring immediate relief and pleasure, but it doesn't take long to see that one cookie doesn't do it. You end up needing more and more to fill up the emptiness from living an unexamined life.

Emotional eaters have struggled with this vicious cycle for years in some cases or even decades. It's so difficult to change the cycle because simply recognizing it doesn't help, nor does willpower. In order to change this deeply entrenched pattern, you have to go deep below the surface to new places never before explored. You need to analyze what's happening in your life—you need to address that which you're trying to avoid by eating, and arrive at a new response. That is the only way to break the cycle. That's what we're going to do together.

## Powerlessness

After working with thousands of emotional eaters, I've been able to decode the secret of overeating and break it down to reveal some basic truths. You think the main thing you're struggling with is feeling powerless over your uncontrollable urge to eat. However, years of experience have proved to me that that sense of powerlessness over food, although deeply agonizing, is really a cover-up, and the consequence, of a deeper experience of powerlessness.

1. You feel powerless about how to deal with your self-doubts.
2. You feel powerless about how to get real satisfaction in life.

3. You feel powerless to insure your own safety.
4. You feel powerless to appropriately assert your independence.
5. You feel powerless to fill yourself up when you feel empty inside.

You eat when you feel powerless in one or more of these five ways, because the experience of powerlessness is almost instantaneously transformed into the uncontrollable urge to eat. This fact is the cornerstone of everything that follows in this book.

We'll teach you how to overcome these five experiences of powerlessness by focusing on the fact that you are not really powerless, but instead are needlessly giving away the power you do have over control of yourself and your life. Once you realize that, your urge to eat will be controllable, and you'll reclaim your power in your relationship to food and increase your power in all the areas of your life

## Compulsion versus Motivation

In one Native American folk tale, a grandfather explains to his grandson that he has two wolves inside him. One wolf fills him with hope and reminds him how wonderful his life is, and the other fills him with doubt and convinces him that nothing is worth the effort. The grandson asks, concerned for his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?" The grandfather replies, "Whichever one I feed."

The two wolves inside you are your positive motivations to lose weight versus your experience of powerlessness that leads to the uncontrollable urge to eat, and the overeating camp usually wins. Every time you overeat because you are *feeling* powerless, you reinforce your erroneous belief that you *are* powerless. You feed the wrong wolf.

No matter how hard you try to diet, no matter how sincere your promise to give up certain foods, you can't stop overeating for very long. When you do, you feel empty or anxious. Feelings of depression and boredom begin to creep in. As long as you remain unaware

of the experience of powerlessness and how it's instantaneously transformed into the uncontrollable urge to eat, you can't change it.

Once you begin to look at the fact that overeating has served you in some way, you may be ready to see that the fact that you haven't been able to lose the weight you want has nothing to do with your willpower, and it isn't because you haven't found the right diet or the magic solution, either. You haven't been able to lose the weight you want because eating has become an automatic soothing response to the stresses in your life.

My goal is to help you become mindful, conscious, observant, and awake in order to find the pause between when you have one of the five experiences of powerlessness and when you begin to overeat. It's only in that space that you can begin to change your emotional eating pattern. Because it happens so quickly, you are not even aware at this point that you are making a decision. But you are, so in each chapter and in each session we are going to try to slow the process down by looking at the gap between the experience of powerlessness and the uncontrollable urge to eat in great detail. That will give you the opportunity to make a different decision.

## Diets Fail Because of Emotional Eating

Diets don't work—for you or for anyone. Of course, eventually you'll have to adhere to a sensible eating plan and a regular exercise routine, but first you must focus on what specifically makes you feel powerless in your life, especially in relation to food.

You may be hopeful now at the start of this journey, but I suspect that you're also skeptical about ultimate success. Your gut may be saying to you, "Can something as deep and as strong as my emotional eating pattern really be changed?"

The answer is "yes"; thousands of people have already gone through the Shrink Yourself program online and have been able to reclaim their power and make dramatic changes in their relationship with food, reversing patterns that had been there for decades. Some

of the members of Shrink Yourself have said, “I learned things that I tried to hide from myself and your program found all of them. I learned I don’t need to let food and eating rule and ruin me and have already lost sixteen pounds,” or “The program was a great way to mirror back behaviors, motivations, and habits that were not serving me well. It gave me a deeper understanding of how destructive these were to my health and happiness—my focus is finally on me and not food”; and finally, “The program showed me how to see what was really bothering me in my life. Once I started to address those things and make changes, the fat just became a useless blanket I was hiding beneath.”

But this place of skepticism is where everyone who has attained lifelong weight loss has to start. Once you get past that, we’ll be ready to look at what has kept you stuck in the same vicious cycle for so long.

You see, the diet industry assumes that because you’re desperate to lose weight, you’ll have enough positive motivation to stick to the program and succeed. As you’ve discovered, eating generates immediate rewards, whereas the rewards you get from dieting won’t be realized for weeks, months, or, for some, years. Future benefits versus the immediate compulsion to eat: that’s the formula for yo-yo dieting. Positive motivation alone simply can’t overcome the desire for the immediate payoff that propels you to eat the things you know you shouldn’t.

I saw this fact clearly demonstrated when I consulted at the Pritikin Institute in Santa Monica, California, where clients paid \$10,000 a month to take part in a controlled diet and exercise program. Although the tuition for the program far exceeded the cost of attending the most expensive private university in America, I frequently found participants sneaking out for hamburgers and french fries at a corner stand. These were all highly motivated people sent to Pritikin by their doctors because of serious, life-threatening health problems, but positive motivation clearly wasn’t enough to help them resist phantom hunger.

One recent study showed that 33 percent of overweight women said they would trade 5 percent of their remaining lifetime for just

ten pounds of permanent fat loss. With that level of desperation, you would expect these women to succeed in dropping pounds, but they don't succeed, so again, you see that negative motivation easily overpowers even the most positive motivation in the weight-loss arena. The desire to hold onto the comforts of emotional eating can be a powerful force indeed—far more powerful than the desire to shed the belly.

Don't be discouraged if you recognize how much you now love and depend on food—if you fear that you won't be able to function if you stop overeating. It's the place where everyone must start. All you need is a good therapist to take you on a healing journey.

#### *SHRINK YOURSELF* SESSION NOTES

### Emotional Eating

- You've defined yourself as an emotional eater.
- You're beginning to look at the differences between phantom hunger and physical hunger.
- You're starting to see glimpses of how you began using food as a source of comfort or a reward.
- You know the secret to overeating is not your lack of willpower but your experience of powerlessness.
- You have to remember that in the gap between powerlessness and the uncontrollable urge to eat, you are making a decision that can be changed.
- You'll have to rid yourself of denial in order to do the learning work that will free you from your food addiction.