

Retrain Your Brain:

How to Change Your Habitual Eating Patterns

by Eliza Kingsford, MA, LPC, NCC

Habitual eating is a tricky thing – partially because all of us do it. Just think of turkey at Thanksgiving, cake on your birthday or popcorn at a movie. We have been taught, through our unique experiences in life, to associate food with certain emotions or habits, but for some people, these triggers can lead to unfavorable behaviors.

Why are food triggers more problematic for some people than others? And why can some people ignore them altogether, while for others, it can cause an all-out binge eating episode? The answer could lie in a person's risk of developing food addiction.

The Science Behind Food Triggers

To put it simply, some researchers say that when we are exposed to “hyper-palatable foods” – foods that are highly processed or are high in added sugar or fat – parts of our brains light up similar to the parts in the brain that light up in response to drugs. If our brain reacts to sugar the same way it reacts to an addictive substance, there will be people who are at risk for using that

sugar in a damaging way – just like alcohol or cocaine. Because of this response, the brain will trigger the “sugar-user” to eat more sugar.

Just as some people can have a couple of drinks after work and not have it lead to alcohol abuse, some people can eat hyper-palatable foods and not have it lead to an overconsumption of food. On the other hand, for those brains or those with genetics who are at risk for an addiction, eating certain trigger foods can lead to a damaging and consistent overconsumption of food, without the person realizing why they are overeating.

Food addiction is not yet recognized as a diagnosable disease, and some even question its existence. Researchers do say that if food addiction is real, it likely only affects a small percentage of the population (about 2 percent), meaning those who will actually be diagnosed as “addicted” to food would be a small percentage, although a much larger percentage may be “affected” by the food but not considered addicted.

For the rest of the population that struggles to maintain a healthy relationship with food, food triggers become less of a science and more of an individualized issue. We all have an emotional relationship with food, and we have all created patterns around food that form as we move through our lives. For some, however, food becomes a coping strategy that is used to reduce negative feelings. Some turn to food in the face of triggers such as habit, boredom or stress.

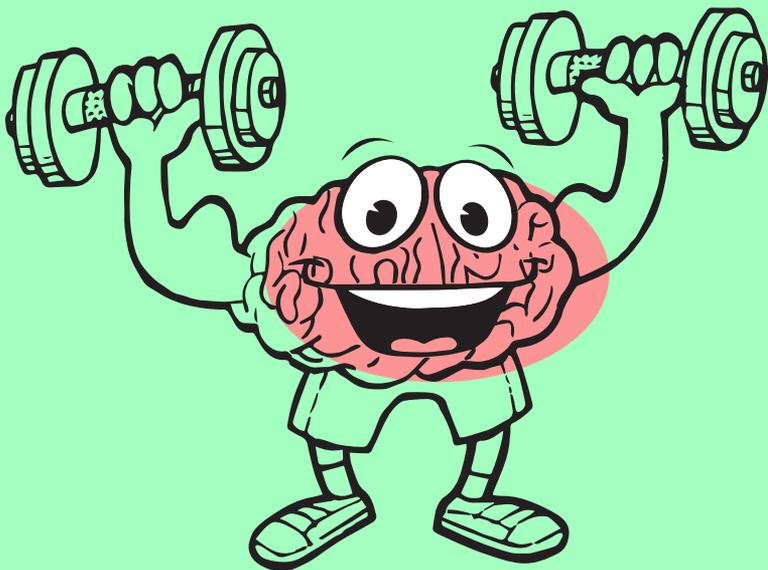
The Myth of Comfort Food

We've all heard the term "comfort food," but what does it really mean? Is the food itself actually comforting, or is it our emotional attachment to the food that creates the illusion of comfort?

In a NASA funded study, researchers at the University of Minnesota found no measurable differences in mood when given comfort food, a neutral food or no food at all. What this might mean is that it is not the ingredients in macaroni and cheese that makes you feel comforted by food, but instead it is the emotional connection you believe you have to macaroni and cheese.

If this is true, the same argument can be made that food doesn't make you feel better – it is all in your mind. If it is all in your mind, then you have the power to change your emotional connection to food. You have the power to channel those emotions into a healthier coping mechanism – one that will not leave you feeling shame and guilt after you've engaged it.

The same is true for those who could be diagnosed as "addicted" to food. Even if you believe you are addicted to food, you still have to make decisions every day about the type of food you are going to consume. If you continue to make food decisions based on emotions or triggers, no matter what the explanation is, you will likely find yourself over-consuming calories you do not want or need.



Managing Your Food Triggers

There are a number of ways to change a food trigger's path. These few steps may help in changing your long-standing patterns with food, whether you are addicted or not.



Become mindful of your food patterns. Do not judge whether your pattern is good or bad, just become aware of what it is.



Keep a food journal. This is one of the easiest ways to be mindful of your food patterns and to hold yourself accountable to them.



Decide if the habit is serving you. Let's face it — if you were not getting something out of a habit, you would not be doing it. That does not mean you *decided* it was serving you. Perhaps it became a habit over time, or perhaps your brain is reacting to the hyper-palatable food you are consuming. In either case, decide if what you really want to be doing is consuming the food that causes you to feel shame, blame and guilt afterwards. Be intentional in your decisions.



Make a game plan. You know your pattern, so how are you going to intervene and change your direction? How will you replace the food trigger behavior? Come up with a few ideas and write them down. Sometimes the act of being intentional about food decisions is enough to make you stop reaching for a trigger food.



Continue to re-evaluate. What alternative coping strategy did you commit to using? How did it work for you? If it did not work, why not? What are you going to do differently next time?

In short: have a plan and put the plan to work!

Conclusion

Regardless of the reason you may be struggling with food triggers, the keys to lasting change are mindfulness, accountability and consistent change. You can retrain your brain to follow different actions once you are aware of patterns that aren't serving you.

About the Author:

Eliza Kingsford, MA, LPC, NCC, is a licensed psychotherapist specializing in weight management, eating disorders and body image. She is Executive Director for Wellspring Camps, a division of RiverMend Health, where she works with children, teens and young adults on weight management solutions throughout their lifespan. As a member of the OAC, Eliza is passionate about changing health reform to include better treatment options for obesity. She is a member of the California Association of Licensed Professional Clinical Counselors and the American Psychological Association.



ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



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The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
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