

THE STOP BINGE EATING PODCAST

with Kirstin Sarfde

Ep #52: Identifying Emotional Eating

Hey! Hi! Are you ready? Then let's dive into today's topic about emotional eating.

Not everyone who emotionally eats binge eats, but everyone who binge eats emotionally eats.

Binge eating really is extreme emotional eating because when we talk about bingeing in response to urges, urges are really strong desires and desire is an emotion. You feel desire for food, it grows and grows and grows, and it turns into an urge. Then there's also the times when binges begin with emotional eating, you eat because you're stressed, overwhelmed, bored, lonely, and it gets out of hand.

A quick side note too, just for ease and simplicity, I interchange feelings and emotions. Some might argue that they're not the same, and I could change all of what I'm talking about here to be called feelings eating, but I just didn't think it was necessary. Emotional eating is the common term so I'm just gonna go with it and emotions are feelings and let's continue on.

Quite often, you're eating in response to your emotions when you're not hungry whether it be between meals or when you should be finishing a meal because you're full but you keep eating anyway. But what I find so interesting is that there are a lot of times when you may not even know you're emotionally eating.

So what is it even?

I like to classify emotional eating to be any eating done in response to an emotion.

A clear identifier of this is if you're eating and you're not hungry, you are eating in response to an emotion.

Emotional eating happens because of one reason and one reason only. You want to feel a certain way and you think eating food is the way to do it.

We're most familiar with emotional eating to be something you do when you're sad. They call it, "eating your feelings." I'm sure you've heard that before.

In your mind, eating is supposed to make you feel better. Eating will help you to not feel sad anymore.

There's also the same side of the coin where you eat when you feel stressed, overwhelmed, angry, or nervous. You think eating will calm you down and give you relief.

But then there's the confusing part of emotional eating – when you eat when you're feeling good. You're not trying to feel better, you like how you feel, so why eat?

Because you want to extend the feeling. Remember, I said you do it to feel a certain way and in this case, you want to continue the feelings you're feeling. You don't want them to go away.

It's all about feelings and emotions manipulation, however it's happening. You're using food to control how you feel.

You feel an urge, you eat to make yourself feel better. You feel desire, you eat to relieve yourself from feeling the desire. You feel bored, you eat to feel entertained. You feel happy, you eat so you can continue to feel happy.

You want to avoid or numb the feelings you don't like and you want the good ones to never go away.

The problem with all of this though is that food and eating do not dictate how you feel. Food and eating do not directly affect your emotions. The only thing that determines how you feel is your thoughts. That is it.

You feel differently when you're eating because you have thoughts about the food or thoughts about eating, or you don't have thoughts about the thing that was triggering thoughts that caused you to feel stressed, overwhelmed, or bored.

Food doesn't make you feel.

Now, sometimes it's not so obvious that you're eating because of feelings and emotions.

There are so many normalized ways that people decide what and when to eat that we don't even realize is emotional eating. It's become such a common part of our decision making.

It's emotional eating in disguise.

Something I used to say a lot was, "I can eat." I mean, duh, of course I could eat, I'm a human capable of eating any time I want to. But what I was really saying was that I wasn't hungry, but I would enjoy eating. It would be pleasurable. Now that you mention eating, I am feeling desire for food and would like to eat some. Desire. I'm going to eat and it's going to be the feeling of desire fueling the eating, not hunger.

Some other things people do that they don't realize is emotional eating are eating certain foods because they want something crunchy, creamy, sweet, or salty.

I swear this one throws my clients for a loop almost every time I bring it up.

I think some of the confusion about this being emotional eating comes in because we're taught that if we're craving something it might mean that we're missing something in our diet. This is might be true, although from the research I've done, I haven't found a clear answer to the real truth behind this. But I will say that sometimes I crave vegetables when I haven't had enough for a day or two. To me, I assume that means my body wants some vitamins and minerals that I haven't given it enough of.

But if you're craving something sweet or salty or crunchy or creamy, this is not your body telling you anything important. Your body never needs any of these things. Seriously, think about it. Why would you body *need* something crunchy? What would that do for it? By the time it actually gets into your body, by the time it gets out of your mouth and into your throat, it's not even crunchy any more.

Any why would you body need something sweet? My favorite answer to this one is that our bodies need sugar because glucose is an important energy source in our bodies. Yes it is, but sweet foods are not the only way for our bodies to get this glucose. To put it simply, carbohydrates, proteins, and fats can all be sources of glucose with carbohydrates being the richest source and let's not forget, vegetables are carbs, starchy vegetables are carbs, rice is a carb, sugar is not the only one.

And what about salty? Our bodies need sodium, right? Of course, but not in the form of a potato chip and if you're craving something salty you're probably not thinking about a chicken breast seasoned with salt and pepper. And if you're eating a substantial amount of food, I'm sure you're getting adequate sodium and salt in your diet. Most people eat too much of it and I think the only way you won't get enough is if you are cooking all your own meals and not adding salt to anything and not using broths or sauces.

When you're wanting a food for it's consistency or because of what it will do to your taste buds, this is not a hunger thing or a body needing thing. It's emotional.

Eating for fuel, for nutrition, for survival, isn't about you, it's about your body. Yes your body is you, it's yours, but there's what you think you want up in your mind, what you want because you think it will make you feel better, because it will stop your thoughts about food, and then there's what your body wants because your body wants to be fueled.

Food is for your body. When we start eating for our minds, that's when we get into trouble.

When you eat for your mind, you're eating because you want to make an urge go away, you want to feel better, you want to eat something crunchy or sweet, you want to eat so you'll stop thinking about food.

When you eat for your body, you're eating because you're hungry, you're stopping eating because you're not hungry anymore, you're eating foods that will be good fuel and satiating that will give you energy.

Do you see the difference?

What you think you *want* to eat when you're eating in response to emotions is irrelevant to your body's needs. You don't need it. It's not nutritionally beneficial.

Another example that people get frustrated by when I tell them it's purely emotional is what you're in the mood for. Why does it matter what you're in the mood for? It's funny how this is the most obvious emotional eating trigger yet people don't see it. Your mood is your state of mind, a state of feeling, not hunger. You may be in the mood for it, but that doesn't mean it's something your body wants or needs. *You're* in the mood for it, your body is not.

Now, sometimes you can be hungry while feeling an emotion at the same time and not eat emotionally. You could be stressed and legit hungry at the same time and you might just go ahead and eat as you normally would, but that's only if you're not letting the stress run the show.

It turns into emotional eating when you decide that your lunch you're hungry for is going to be nachos with all the fixings instead of the healthy lunch you made and packed for yourself to eat.

It's not just about when you're eating, it's not just eating when you're not hungry, but also how and what you choose to eat.

What is your decision based off of? Is it based off of what will be best for your body or what will be best for your thoughts and feelings?

If you're legit hungry, you'll eat a plain chicken breast and plain broccoli. Anything will do. But when it's emotional, it's going to be more specific than that. Either one certain food, a category of foods, or maybe even nothing. Nothing will hit the spot. That's the dangerous one where you're searching and searching and nothing satisfies you emotionally. You just want something and you keep eating things hoping that eventually you will find the answer. That's a binge precursor if I've ever seen one.

So now I've given you some solid emotional eating identifiers, like you're wanting something sweet or crunchy, but maybe you're having a hard time at other times because you're not in tune with your emotions or you're hungry and not sure if you're eating emotionally or for hunger. You might be completely unaware you're doing it now I want to give you a way to know for sure if you're emotionally eating.

You might hate this idea, but I'm going to give it to you anyway.

You plan what you're going to eat the day before you eat it. You make this plan based on what you want to eat that will nutritionally and physically satisfy your body.

This plan will be filled with hunger satisfying, body wanting foods and you're going to structure your meals and snacks in a way that will conquer hunger.

Then, this is the part that matters most here. Anything you want to eat off your plan, is purely emotionally driven.

Your plan will take care of your body's needs. Anything you want off of it, will be only for your personal wants.

Your mind is going to say it doesn't want the salad with grilled chicken and ranch that you planned. But why not? It will fuel your body quite nicely I'm sure. But you're craving something else. Something else sounds better or you're in the mood for something else. This is emotions people. This is desire and cravings.

Your mind is going to say it wants a donut that someone brought into the office and it's not on your plan. This is not hunger or your body asking for a donut, it's your emotions. Your body and hunger is just fine having some eggs and a yogurt.

Now, does this all mean you can't ever eat joy foods because they're obviously not hunger driven? No, of course not. Nothing is off limits. You can have whatever you want.

And the truth is, emotional eating is something we all do. I bet I'd have a hard time finding someone who does it 0% of the time. Joy eats are for joy and pleasure and if you're going to eat them it's going to be fueled by desire and probably not hunger, or it could be both if your joy food is say pizza for dinner. How often you want to eat for emotions is up to you, you can do it however often you want, but make sure you're aware of what you're doing and making your decision to do it consciously. Don't just react to your emotions because you don't know how else to deal with them. Do it because you genuinely want to. It's something you are okay with planning for yourself the day before and something you'll be okay with having done after it's over. Those are your true wants, what you want before and after, not what you want in the moment when you're just feeling an urge, desire, or stressed.

The real goal here is to decide what you're going to eat consciously and with purpose.

When you're eating because of emotions, it's very responsive and impulsive and not thought through. When you decide ahead of time, it is.

You can decide you're going to have a donut tomorrow and make that choice from a conscious place of purposefully allowing yourself to have a pleasurable, non-nutritious food rather just seeing it, wanting it, and eating it.

This is your problem. You want and then you go for it. It's all so automatic. So you gotta stop it in it's tracks and un-automate it. Make it so your automatic response is to think about what you're doing and make a self-benefitting choice that will benefit your well-being.

It's going to make it so much easier and so much more clear for you to know what is happening if you're following a plan. You'll know whether you're eating what's on plan or not. You either are or you aren't and if you aren't, it's emotion driven. Simple.

Emotional eating is used as a way to manage your emotions, but it doesn't really work and usually results in the opposite of what you were wanting. You wanted to feel better and now you feel the same way you did before you ate and probably worse. You wanted to extend your good feelings but then probably created extended bad feelings.

Food doesn't solve emotions and doesn't really cause emotions to change or do anything, it's your thoughts that do that.

So, emotional eating is all about you trying to feel a certain way. It doesn't work though because the only true way to change how you feel is by changing what you're thinking.

It shows up in sneaky ways so watch out for it. The only real, honest reason for you to eat is if you're hungry and you'll know it's real if you can eat any whole, nutrient dense food that you like and feel satisfied.

Planning ahead is a great way to set yourself up to identify true hunger and to help you see when you're wanting to eat for emotional reasons.

The less emotional eating you do, the less you will binge. Also know that when you binge less, and you're eating in response to urges less, you'll most likely notice some emotional eating underneath. It all runs together so be on the lookout for this eating precursor and work on feeling your feelings and working through them instead eating to manipulate them. The solution is in your thinking, not the food. Have a great week, bye bye!