

THE STOP BINGE EATING PODCAST

with Kirstin Sarfde

Ep #279: When Bad Things Happen and You Want to Eat

Hi! Today I am talking with you about when bad things happen and you want to eat because sometimes in life, bad things happens. Sad, devastating, upsetting, unjust things happen.

And for many of us, those are the times we want to eat the most because of the intense emotions that we feel during those times.

And the more intense our feelings, and the longer we feel those feelings, the more we want to eat.

This is of course because we don't want to feel those feelings and eating will be a temporary distraction from them, eating will temporarily numb them, or eating will make us feel better temporarily.

You might experience relief, numbness, comfort, or soothing as you're eating the food and you keep eating it because if you stop, the distraction of the food and better feelings will be gone and you'll be back to feeling how you were feeling before.

Basically, you might think eating is way to cope with the emotions you feel during those bad times and it's a way for you to take a break from how you feel.

But as I said, and as you know, it's only going to be temporary and you're not really coping because you're not effectively dealing with what's difficult.

But I also know that sometimes people just don't care if it's temporary.

They're just tired of feeling how they're feeling and want a break from it.

And I get that.

And if you want to take a break and you want to distract, and even if that distraction is with food that's fine.

Unless it becomes a problem.

It's okay to distract yourself when you've experienced something bad and it can actually be good for you sometimes instead of spending all of your time being focused on the bad thing.

It's okay to get sucked into a movie or a book or to do something with friends, or to enjoy good food or whatever, as long as it doesn't end up making you feel worse in the end.

One of my group members just found out that their dog is very sick and it was extremely emotional for her. She's handling her emotions very well considering and once in awhile, she'll eat a cookie for a moment of joy, and it's totally fine. She's not overdoing it, she's just enjoying the pleasure of the cookie and taking a break from her sadness.

I also know someone who experiences seasonal depression in the winter and they've told me that sometimes they eat just to take a break from feeling how they feel and they're totally fine with it.

They don't see it as a problem, it doesn't really have any big negative consequences for them, so it's not a problem for them.

But if you're distracting excessively, and are never allowing yourself to feel your emotions when something bad happens or when you're going through a tough time, then your emotions are unlikely going to truly get better.

Eating isn't really going to fix anything. It's not really going to stop you from feeling how you feel. Those emotions are going to come right back once you finish eating or aren't distracting yourself anymore.

And usually when we eat excessively to numb away or distract from feelings we end up feeling worse afterward. The temporary relief from emotions actually leads you to feel physically bad and emotionally worse afterward.

So too much distraction, or distractions that lead to negative outcomes are not going to help.

Also, we can't distract ourselves 100% of the time no matter how hard we try.

Emotions are persistent and if there is cause for an emotion, you will feel it no matter how hard you try not to.

Your emotions want to be felt, they don't want to be shoved away. They want to be heard. They want you to address them, nurture them, and embrace them.

But too many of you are unwilling to. When your emotions are intense or when they are there for awhile, you stop taking care of them and try to ignore them or push them away.

That's not going to be a useful way to handle them.

What will be useful is, in this order, to first, allow your emotions to exist and be there in your body. And second, to work on your thoughts that are causing you to feel how you're feeling.

Most people want to skip that first part where you just feel it but it is so important that you don't.

If you do try to skip it, if you try to skip the part where you feel, it's likely that you will end up creating an outcome that you don't want to – like bingeing or some other negative outcome from trying to feel better through too much distraction.

And if you try to skip it by jumping to the second thing, which is trying to change your thoughts so you can feel better, it simply might not work.

And for those who might not be familiar, changing your thoughts is what will make you really feel better because it's your thoughts that cause you to feel the way you do.

It's not the thing that happened, it's what you think about it.

This is why when something bad happens, we don't feel the same intensity of emotion or sometimes even the same emotion forever. Our emotions change because our thoughts change.

For example, if someone breaks up with you or divorces you, you may think about it in a devastating way when it happens and soon after it happens. But months or years later you might feel differently. The break up or divorce still happened, but, your thoughts about it changed. That's why you feel differently or why your emotions aren't as intense. You're thinking differently and maybe you're just thinking about it less. Basically, thoughts change and then feeling change so if you truly want to feel better after bad things happen, your thoughts need to change.

But trying to change your thoughts right after the bad thing happens is sometimes very, very challenging, maybe even sometimes impossible.

This is because when the bad thing happens, we tell ourselves a story about it, we have thoughts about it, we have opinions, we have interpretations, and they can be really hard to change and get out of when the thing that happened is fresh.

It's hard to shift away from the thoughts creating devastation, sadness, anger, disappointment, etc in that moment.

So trying to do the work to look on the bright side, or to just be grateful, or to be accepting, or to forgive, or whatever it is that will make you truly feel better, isn't going to be the most useful work for you to do.

The most useful will be to just be in the feelings you're feeling now.

It's to go through it.

The way out is through so when you're allowing yourself to go through it, to go through the emotions, you're putting yourself on the path toward finding relief from the emotion.

When you eat to distract from, numb, or ignore how you're feeling, you're basically putting a blockade on that path and are stopping yourself from going down it. You're choosing to take a short cut toward temporary relief that ends up being a dead-end, instead of just going down the longer emotion path toward true relief.

Now, I get that sometimes it can be frustrating to take that longer path. Maybe you think you shouldn't still feel this way. Maybe you're getting impatient and just want it to end already.

But getting frustrated isn't going to help. It's just going to create more discomfort for you that you're going to add on to the emotions you're already feeling.

However you're feeling, you're supposed to feel it. If you're still feeling an emotion, that means you're still supposed to be feeling it.

Because you are.

Getting frustrated happens when you argue with how you're feeling.

But when you agree with how you're feeling, meaning you agree with your current reality, then you can be in allowance and acceptance which will move you closer toward relief.

And just know that relief will come.

You're not just going to feel the feeling and then feel it at the same intensity forever.

You're not because you're going to do the mental work, the thought work, to make sure that doesn't happen.

People get so afraid that if they allow themselves to feel then it's going to get worse and they're going to fall into an abyss of uncomfortable emotions.

But that's not what happens.

You feel a feeling, it decreases in intensity, and then you work on your thoughts in order to resolve or to decrease the intensity of the emotion.

And I just want to say that not all emotions will be resolved, especially when really bad things happen like death. I personally have not experienced extreme grief but I have people close to me who have. One of them experienced a miscarriage and after getting help, she explained to me how she believes she will feel grief forever but, it has already become easier for her to manage it and live with it. The intensity or frequency of feeling it decreased. So it's not what it once was. It's not still as intense or as frequent as it was. And because she's worked on her mind, on her thoughts, she also experiences other feelings about the miscarriage that don't feel painful, like love.

But when bad things that aren't as extreme as death happen, most of the time we can resolve the emotions we feel and feel differently about what happened.

The intense emotions will pass, and in most cases, you will move on to feel different emotions, less uncomfortable emotions because you will do the work to change the story you tell about what happened.

But until then, you will feel the emotions you feel.

You will feel them because bingeing and eating excessively is just going to add more bad.

Now, I want to tell you about an experience I had recently that actually inspired me to do this episode. And as I'm telling you the story, you're going to hear examples of things I've talked about in this episode.

So something bad happened to me. It wasn't the worst thing that could happen, some people may not even understand why it was as bad for me as it was but, for me, it was really bad.

And I just want to say that we really shouldn't judge people for what they get super emotional about. If you or someone else is emotionally affected by something, your and their feelings are valid. We all have different things that are important to us, and we should respect what each person finds important to them.

So that being said, the bad thing that happened to me was that on October 2nd I fractured my tibia and sprained my MCL. It was a tibial plateau fracture which means the top of my shin bone was cracked and the ligament on the side of my knee was sprained.

It happened while I was surfing. I fell off my board onto my feet in very shallow water and because I fell instead of intentionally jumping, I didn't prepare for the impact, which was apparently a lot. I'm guessing I didn't bend my knee and I twisted it so that's how it all happened.

I couldn't stand up because when I tried, it felt like my knee was giving out.

So my boyfriend came out of the water help me and carried me up onto the beach.

As I sat there, I was feeling a lot of pain. It hurt, obviously. And I was crying but, I was in tears mostly not because of the pain but, because of what was going on in my mind.

I was sitting there, unable to walk, having my boyfriend and friends remove my wetsuit from my body, and I was just thinking about all the things I couldn't do now.

Now, it was just an injured knee so of course there were things I still could do. I could still work, thankfully my job doesn't require me to walk or use my left leg, I could still talk, I could still spend time with people, I could still use my arms.

But my brain didn't want to think about any of that. In that moment, none of that mattered.

What mattered, what was important to me in that moment was that I couldn't go to tap class which is one of my favorite things, I couldn't finish the season in my volleyball league, I couldn't go for walks which I did on most days, I couldn't surf, couldn't paddle board, and my boyfriend and I were going to do one last camping trip for the year that weekend and now I couldn't do that either. I just kept thinking about all the things I couldn't do now.

Yes, I knew it was temporary, even though I didn't yet know what my injury was but, it didn't matter.

My personal life was rocked and I was extremely sad, disappointed, devastated, and also angry at myself. I know it was an accident but, long story short, I kept thinking I shouldn't have even stood up on the board when I caught that wave.

As we were driving to urgent care, my boyfriend asked me what was going on in my mind. I told him I was having a pity party and was thinking about all the things I couldn't do.

And what I really appreciated about him in that moment, besides him already being so extremely helpful and taking care of me, was that he didn't downplay how I was feeling. He didn't try to make me feel better.

And neither did I. I was very aware of what I was doing in my brain but, I didn't even try to stop it. I just allowed it to happen. I didn't try to look on the bright side of what I could do. I mean, maybe a little here and there but mostly, it was just downside. And I just let myself feel bad not because I wanted to but, trying to make myself feel better just wasn't working.

Whenever I'd come up with a bright side, like, at least it was my left knee so I could still drive, my brain would offer something that I couldn't do.

And I wasn't going to fight it. I was just letting myself think how I was thinking and feel how I felt.

After the urgent care visit, where no answers were given, we got dinner and brought it back to my place.

And what I chose to eat was light and nutritious. Why? Because I had a body that needed healing now and it was late and I wanted to get the best sleep I could. I already assumed it wouldn't be good sleep because of the pain and position I'd have to sleep in and I didn't want to make it worse.

Eating a bunch fried crap or a big dessert might have tasted good but it wouldn't have helped how I felt either emotionally or physically.

In the days after, I continued to be highly emotional as I kept thinking about what I couldn't do and adding to it, most day to day things were taking twice as long, some three times as long for me to do because I was on crutches. Like moving things from one place to another because I couldn't use my hands while walking. There was a lot of frustration. There was also a lot of mental exhaustion.

And I let myself feel it all. I didn't hold back tears and I didn't try to talk myself out of it. I let myself be in it.

And I didn't eat to make myself feel better. Part of it was because I knew it really wouldn't work, part of it was because I knew it would make my exhaustion worse. And one other reason was because it was a pain in the butt to eat anyway because moving a plate or bowl from the kitchen counter to the couch was a whole process with the crutches, and I could have stood in the kitchen and eaten but standing too long in the beginning of all this hurt. So that was something that made it easier to not overeat.

But mostly it was me not wanting to make things worse. I already felt bad enough, I didn't need to make myself feel worse. Plus, my body need to heal and I didn't want to overdo it and hinder the process.

So I let myself be in the pity party but I knew I wasn't going to stay there. I wasn't going to let myself. I knew that the feelings would become less intense with time and I also knew that I had the ability to change how I was thinking and feeling about this whole thing.

I wasn't going to spend the next however many weeks or months feeling sorry for myself.

So I was prepared to sit down, do some thought work, and if needed, get coaching.

But thankfully, I didn't really have to.

As the days went on, I slowly moved into acceptance, which was where I would find the relief from my emotions.

I wasn't going to be happy about not being able to walk without crutches but I could accept that this is what's happening now and it's temporary and I'll be okay.

And my brain got to that place on it's own.

Now, had it not, like I said, I could have done the work to get there, that's the same kind of work I do with my group members in The Stop Binge Eating Program quite often when bad things happen, like binges, and I was prepared to do that work.

But as it sometimes happens, my thoughts shifted on their own without much effort on my part.

And then there was one more day of intense emotion. It was day I got the results of my MRI. And before it even happened, I was saying that I just wanted to get the results, find out what's wrong, get my treatment and recovery plan, cry about it all, and then move on.

And when I was at my doctor's appt, I felt emotions, I cried, I cried on the way home, and I cried when I got home, just as I expected. And I let it happen.

When I got home, I texted some people to share my results and one of those people called me to talk about it. As we were talking they asked me if I was sad and I said yes. And they told me I shouldn't feel sad. Then they proceeded to try and get me to look on the bright side and were saying, "well at least it's not this and at least you can still do this," and I did not like it.

Basically, it felt like they were invalidating my emotions and telling me how I should feel.

When they said it again, that I shouldn't feel that way, I couldn't let it slide. I told them that it is how I feel and I should feel this way. I'm upset. I told them that I understood that they were trying to help and trying to make me feel better but it wasn't the time. It was the time for me to just be in this feeling.

Then they brought up the fact that I'm a coach and I told them that if I was coaching someone that was in this same moment then I would recommend that they just feel how they're feeling.

That's actually exactly what I did when I was recently coaching someone who's husband wanted a separation and someone else who's mom had just died, and the person I mentioned before who's dog is really sick. They weren't ready to feel better or change their thoughts about what happened or is happening. The best thing they could do was to just feel.

So for the rest of that day for me, I went through the emotions and was then back to acceptance.

And I'm still there now most of the time. I still can't walk without crutches so of course there's times of frustration about how long some things take for me to do on crutches and there's time where I'm sad about what I can't do or about things I'll miss out on in the next month or two but it's so much less. Instead, I'm focusing more on what I can do, and am grateful it's not worse, am grateful it's only a few months of recovery, and I'm doing my best to enjoy my free time even though I can't do the things I want to do the most.

Feeling and then working on your thoughts is how you're going to get through the hard times.

You're not going to do it by eating. That's just going to create more hard times.

Now, I am aware that I'm probably more experienced than some of you at feeling emotions.

I've put in the practice and now I am willing to feel any emotion, no matter how intense.

So if you're not as experienced at feeling emotions, when bad things happen and you feel a lot of emotion and it's intense, it might be challenging.

So I recommend that you practice with the smaller, day to day emotions that you feel. Practice feeling the smaller ones, get more comfortable with feeling them, so when the bigger ones come, you'll be ready.

And you'll be ready and willing to feel them for as long as they're there.

That's one of the most important part of feeling feelings, and feeling urges as well. Being willing to feel them for any amount of time.

You don't know how long they will be intense and how long they'll be in your body. But what you can know is that you are capable of feeling them for as long as they are.

And you will be so much better for having done it. You will find true relief and you will also feel proud of yourself.

And one more thing I want to say about all of this.

If something bad happens, and you feel intense emotions for awhile, and you do end up overeating or bingeing, do not be hard on yourself. Don't judge yourself. Don't mentally beat yourself up. Especially if you're someone who is still working on feeling emotions. But even if you're someone who's gotten really good at feeling emotions.

You're not perfect. You're a human who doesn't want to feel uncomfortable. Sometimes you feel driven to fix your discomfort with food. And sometimes you might do it.

And you're okay. Beating yourself up about it and being hard on yourself isn't going to help. Be kind to yourself. Be compassionate and have understanding. And know that you're doing your best.

That's something that was really helpful for the person I mentioned who's mom died. When it happened, she had already done a lot of work on feeling emotions so thankfully, she wasn't bingeing like maybe should would have if this happened months or years ago. But there were times when she'd eat some extra joy foods. And she comforted herself with her words anytime that she did.

She would remind herself that she's doing her best, and she was. She really was, and her best included some overeating.

Be gentle with yourself when you go through rough times and when bad things happen.

Be gentle with your emotions, let them be instead of trying to force them away, be gentle with your thoughts, work on them when they're ready to be worked on, and be gentle with yourself if you make mistakes, you're doing your best.

Alright, well, I hope nothing bad happens to you for awhile but, if it does, or if you're going through something right now, I hope this helps.

Bye bye.