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Why You Stress-Eat & How to Stop It

Sometimes it happens after you get an angry email from your boss. Or, maybe because you recently connected with a new love interest...and now he or she's gone MIA. Whatever the dilemma, cue your hand in the bag of Cheetos or a visit to the kitchen for, well... whatever's there.

You know what it is: stress eating. "It's perfectly human to want to avoid pain and seek relief," says Minh-Hai Alex, a registered dietitian and founder of Mindful Nutrition in Seattle. "Stress eating usually happens when we want to disconnect from the moment. It's like changing the channel in our brain to try to change how we feel," she explains. Here's why food is such a salve for stress — and how to stop the cycle.

This is why you turn to food when you're stressed

It's no surprise if you suddenly feel famished when deadlines or crises strike. "Stress activates your adrenal glands to release cortisol, increasing your appetite," says Melissa McCreery, PhD, ACC, psychologist and the emotional eating expert behind the site Too Much On Her Plate. Stress also impedes hunger hormones, like ghrelin, that regulate your appetite, research shows. If the anxiety is cutting into your sleep, a lack of zzz's ramps up your appetite even more.

Unfortunately, that anxiety-induced hunger can have long-term consequences for your waistline. In fact, one new study found that women who reported they were stressed burned fewer calories and fat, and had a higher insulin response after eating a higher fat meal. Published in the journal Biological Psychiatry, the researchers concluded that these stress-induced changes led women to burn about 100 fewer calories per day — a difference that could cause you to pack on 11 pounds in a year.

When you're under stress, you often feel out of control and overwhelmed — and that can leak into your eating habits, McCreery says. So it's no surprise that you end up eating like a hungry lion, rather than keeping up your normally healthy habits. "It's true, you're worried about the future — not what you're eating in the present," she adds.

Stress depletes the cognitive resources you need to relax, recharge and be resilient, and to practice creative problem solving, says McCreery. That's why eating a cookie or a pint of mint chip always feels easier than actually coming up with a plan to deal with the stressor.



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When you're under stress, you often feel out of control and overwhelmed — and that can leak into your eating habits, McCreery says. So it's no surprise that you go after junk food like a hungry lion, rather than keeping up your normally healthy habits. "You're worried about the past or the future — not what you're eating in the present," she adds.

Stress depletes the cognitive resources you need to remain focused and resilient, and to practice creative problem solving, says McCreery. That's why getting elbow-deep in a pint of mint chip always feels easier than actually coming up with a plan for how to tackle that super tough work project.

When Junk food is calling your name

While it's too bad you don't crave celery sticks and carrots during crazed moments, that would go against biology. Fries, snack mixes, cookies and ice cream are go-tos because these high-carb, high-fat eats increase the brain's feel-good dopamine response, Alex explains. Then, next time you get into a bind, you'll hear the siren song of chocolate chips because your noggin has come to expect the rewarding hit of



dopamine — and knows where to find it. (Ahem, cookies.)

Not only that, but it's easy for stress snacking to become an ingrained habit. A 2015 study in *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism* discovered that one reason we eat high sugar foods is because sugar dampens stress-induced cortisol responses. Translation: You feel better on a sugar high. Over time, your brain may start to rely on these foods to simmer down.

Problem is, anyone who's done it (and who hasn't?) knows what it feels like after you eat for emotional reasons — the guilt and frustration hit you like a hangover. Research from Penn State backs up what we've all suspected — that eating bad-for-you foods can make a grumpy mood even worse.

How to Stop Stress Eating

Ready to break free from stress eating and bring back happiness to your eats? Try some of these simple tricks next time anxiety strikes.

1. Focus on the real issue.

We all know food is just a crutch when we're stressed. "Stress eating is not the primary problem, but a symptom of unmet needs," says Alex. Ask yourself 'How do I feel?' or 'What do I need?' to figure out what's really getting under your skin.

2. Think long-term.

Take a minute to focus on the future (whether that means recalling your weight loss goals, or how awesome you want to look on vacation next month) before you give in to stress eating. It can help get you out of the moment so you make healthier food choices instead of succumbing to the lure of a tasty treat, suggests a 2014 study.

3. Get mindful.

In a study in the *Journal of Obesity*, women who underwent mindfulness training — learning stress reduction techniques, how to recognize hunger, and pay attention to taste — were less apt to stress eat and lost more belly fat compared to a control group. Next time you're feeling taxed, try this exercise. You'll learn to identify your feelings, accept the unpleasant ones and focus on your breathing so you can fight the automatic urge to reach for a snack.

4. Be kind to yourself.

"Self-compassion can decrease stress eating," says Alex. "When you're a kind, understanding friend to yourself, it's easier to resist the urge to try to disconnect through stress eating," she adds. If you do stress eat, promise that you won't beat yourself up and understand that it happens to everyone sometimes. That can help stop you from eating out of failure and help you make better choices later.

5. If all else fails...

Go ahead and indulge. "Food is a lovely, comforting thing," says McCreery. So if you're going to do it anyway, she recommends really enjoying it. "Sit down, let yourself relax, and taste the ice cream." Of course, do so in moderation. Plan on savoring a small brownie rather than the whole batch.

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