



# Emotional overeating

The facts and

where to find support

**Beat**  
Eating disorders

# What is emotional overeating?

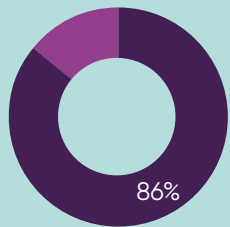
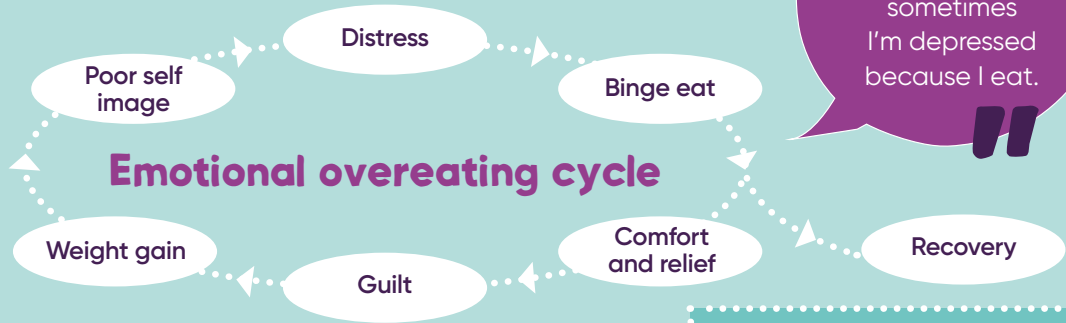
Emotional overeating means turning to food for comfort and escape during times of low mood. When someone overeats emotionally it is in an attempt to feel better, to feel comforted or soothed by eating.

Enjoying food as a reward or pick-me-up from time to time is a normal and natural part of life and when used as part of a range of strategies to manage emotions and cope, it can be helpful and is something most people do. However, if this the only strategy and it happens so regularly you feel you are out of control, or caught in a cycle, problems arise.

It's like I'm eating to try and suppress other feelings that I don't want to surface.

Many people emotionally overeat as a way to silence a range of negative emotions and distress.

Sometimes I eat because I'm depressed, sometimes I'm depressed because I eat.



86% of people who emotionally overeat told us they had a negative body image of themselves.

\*Beat survey, 2014

The guilt and shame can leave people feeling worse rather than better.

Recovery from emotional overeating is possible, though you might need support on your journey. Read on to find further help and support.

All quotes received from emotional overeating support group participants and volunteers.



## Emotional hunger vs physical hunger

This kind of eating is not related to physical hunger, instead it is about satisfying an emotional hunger.

Emotional Hunger	Physical Hunger
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comes on suddenly</li> <li>• Feels like it needs to be satisfied instantly</li> <li>• Craves specific foods, especially those high in fat and sugar</li> <li>• Not satisfied with a full stomach</li> <li>• Causes feelings of guilt, shame and powerlessness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comes on gradually</li> <li>• Is not urgent in nature</li> <li>• A range of foods sound appealing</li> <li>• Satisfied with a full stomach</li> <li>• Does not cause negative emotions</li> </ul>



## Emotional overeating vs binge eating disorder

These two terms have lots in common, they both talk about a time when an individual eats an amount of food as a coping strategy for emotional hunger.

Emotional overeating	Binge eating disorder
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A type of eating behaviour</li> <li>• The amount of food eaten in an episode of emotional overeating does not need to be large</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A specific mental health diagnosis which may be given when binge eating occurs regularly over a prolonged period of time and is causing distress</li> <li>• In a binge eating episode a person will eat an unusually large amount of food</li> <li>• Physical hunger can trigger binge eating</li> <li>• Ritualistic in nature – binges might be planned in advance, particular foods and plates used and some people say they feel like they are in a 'trance'</li> </ul>

## How can I spot the signs and symptoms of emotional overeating?

Behavioural	Psychological	Physical
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bingeing</li> <li>• Eating in secret</li> <li>• Hiding food wrappers</li> <li>• Spending lots of money on food</li> <li>• Becoming withdrawn</li> </ul>	<p><b>Shorter term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comfort</li> <li>• Relief</li> <li>• Escape</li> </ul> <p><b>Longer term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Anxiety</li> <li>• Guilt</li> <li>• Shame</li> <li>• Worry</li> <li>• Feeling fed up</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stomach pains</li> <li>• Bloating</li> <li>• Feeling sick</li> <li>• Poor skin</li> <li>• Trouble sleeping</li> <li>• Weight gain</li> </ul>

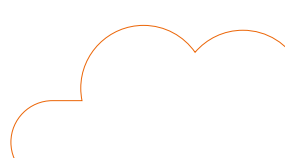
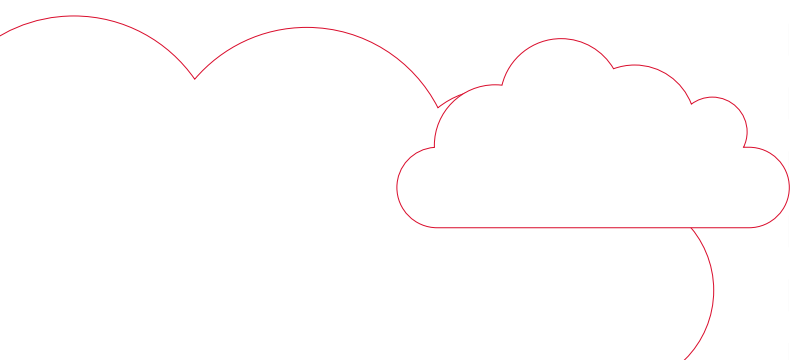
## What causes emotional overeating?

We are still learning more about the causes of emotional overeating and eating disorders. There is no one main cause or trigger for an individual and it is likely to be a complex combination of genetic, psychological, environmental, social and biological influences.

Spotting the signs and symptoms of emotional overeating in yourself or someone you know can be difficult, particularly as often the eating behaviour is kept hidden or secret from those around them.

### What could increase the risk of developing emotional overeating?

- Low self-esteem and sense of self-worth.
- Other mental health conditions like depression and anxiety.
- Stressful or traumatic events in your past.
- Dissatisfaction with the way you look.
- Isolation, boredom or feelings of stress and anger.
- Differences in your brain or the level of hormones produced by your brain to others who don't eat emotionally.
- Following strict, low calorie or restricting diets.



# Help and support

Recovery from emotional overeating is possible, read on for support for yourself and others.

## Self-help strategies



### Self-care

Be kind and forgiving to yourself. Acknowledge that emotional overeating is not a weakness in character but a mental health issue. Take time to do something calming, comforting and non-food related: going for a walk, reading your favourite book, trying meditation are just some ideas.



### Food and mood diaries

Keeping a diary of the food you eat can encourage eating healthily and mindfully. Commenting on your mood alongside food might help you understand patterns and identify trigger times. Keeping a diary recording how you're feeling is a way to express yourself and help you make sense of how you are feeling. Some people use journals to note positive things every day – a good pick-me-up during times of low mood.



### Art, creativity, self-expression

Tapping into your creative side can help you take time out from a busy schedule, express emotions and reflect. Take pride and satisfaction in what you create.



### Distraction techniques

If you can identify triggers and put strategies in place to help find comfort and support without turning to food, it can help to break the cycle of emotional overeating.



### Exercise

Taking regular exercise brings benefits to both physical and mental health. It releases happy hormones within the brain, helping to increase feelings of happiness and motivation. It can also help to control weight.

Exercising regularly doesn't mean joining a gym, which can be expensive and you might find it daunting exercising in public.

Walking is a great form of exercise, try an exercise video at home or find a trusted friend to go to a class with you for support.



### Talking with friends and family

Although it can be difficult, talking to someone you trust can provide comfort. It can help them understand what you're going through and see how they can best support you.



### Self-help books

There are lots of books which can help you understand more about emotional overeating and how to use self-help strategies on your way to recovery. Visit [beateatingdisorders.org.uk/recovery-information/book-reviews](http://beateatingdisorders.org.uk/recovery-information/book-reviews) to find some we have read and reviewed.

I think that, ultimately, the key to recovery is learning to respect, like and love oneself and learning to be comfortable in our skin.

The more I maintain a positive feeling towards myself, the less I overeat emotionally.

Be kinder to yourself. Whatever it is that's eating away at you inside and leading you to experience it as hunger, it can be put in its place. You have to be prepared to work and keep on going, but you will get there.

Colouring books are great for de-stressing, it's a form of meditation.

When I play my piano it gives me time to release and reconnect with myself. Afterwards I feel refreshed.

It feels good to be able to connect with the people around me.

At first I felt embarrassed about talking to my doctor, but when I did she was kind, helpful and patient.

The group has made me think about all the chains I carry around and how to get rid of them one by one.

## Finding professional help and support

You might find to overcome your emotional overeating you need to seek out professional help or support.

### Visit your GP

Your GP should be able to support and refer, if necessary to other NHS services in your area. This might mean seeing a dietician or nutritionist, an eating disorder specialist or prescribing medication to help your recovery.

### Seek counselling

There are many registered counsellors who specialise in supporting people with eating problems. Find them on Beat's HelpFinder ([helpfinder.beateatingdisorders.org.uk](http://helpfinder.beateatingdisorders.org.uk)). While you might need to pay for a private counsellor some local charities may provide this free of charge.

### Join a support group

Talking about your experiences with others going through similar situations can help you feel less alone. They might also give you the opportunity to exchange distraction techniques and coping methods. Find them on Beat's HelpFinder ([helpfinder.beateatingdisorders.org.uk](http://helpfinder.beateatingdisorders.org.uk)) or join our online 'Nightingale' support group at 7pm every Friday for people suffering with emotional overeating or binge eating.

### Call, email or chat online to Beat's Helpline

Beat's Helpline offers support and information about eating disorders. If you're worried about yourself or someone you know call or email the service to speak to one of our Helpline Support Workers. 0808 801 0677 [help@beateatingdisorders.org.uk](mailto:help@beateatingdisorders.org.uk). For more information visit: [beateatingdisorders.org.uk/support-services](http://beateatingdisorders.org.uk/support-services).

## I'm worried about someone I know

Emotional overeating doesn't just affect the individual but the people around them too. You might feel at a loss at what to do or how to support them. By reading this leaflet and learning more about emotional overeating you've already made a big first step.

### How to help:

- Ask them if they'd like to talk.
- Be prepared to speak openly and honestly.
- Leave any prejudgement behind – emotional overeating isn't about a lack of willpower or education about exercise and healthy eating, but a complex mental health issue.
- Be understanding and patient.
- Encourage them to seek help.
- Offer your support – could you accompany them to support groups or their medical appointments? Is there a particular difficult time when it would be useful to have someone to call?

**You can't change the person but you can empower and support them to their recovery.**

How to help

Ask...

Be prepared...

Be understanding...

Be patient...

Encourage...

Offer your support...

Leave prejudgement behind

# Looking for support?

**Helpline:** 0808 801 0677

[help@beateatingdisorders.org.uk](mailto:help@beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

**Youthline:** 0808 801 0711

[fyp@beateatingdisorders.org.uk](mailto:fyp@beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

**Studentline:** 0808 801 0811

[studentline@beateatingdisorders.org.uk](mailto:studentline@beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

 [@BeatEDSupport](https://twitter.com/BeatEDSupport)

 [BeatEDSupport](https://www.instagram.com/BeatEDSupport)

 [@beatED](https://twitter.com/beatED)

 [beat.eating.disorders](https://www.facebook.com/beat.eating.disorders)

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