



# The Psychology of Eating

*Sometimes I find myself reaching for food when I'm not even hungry. Why can't I control these eating urges?*

The reasons why we eat the way we do are as complex as our personalities and family histories. We think that it should be easy to change eating and activity behaviors simply because our desire is so strong.

Over the course of a lifetime, however, each of us gradually develops a relationship with food that determines how easy the change process will be. For some people, this relationship is very friendly, meaning that food is seen for what it is — a tool for nourishing the body in a very pleasant and delicious way. For others, however, thoughts of food create conflict, anxiety and unhappy feelings. And these feelings complicate the process of change.

There are a number of factors that can affect your relationship with food, including:

- The messages you got as a child about the value of food
- Your history with dieting and body size
- Your feelings of self-worth and self-competence

Most of what you learned about food, you learned as a child. Maybe you were not allowed to be angry or sad, and the only way you knew how to deal with those feelings was by putting them down with food. Perhaps you were taught to always clean your plate. Or maybe you learned that certain foods were good and others were bad.

The eating habits you developed as a child, as well as the feelings you've come to associate with food and eating, often guide your adult eating

behaviors on an unconscious level. If, for example, the only time your parents paid attention to you was at mealtime, you may have learned to associate eating a large, prolonged dinner with emotional nurturing. Or maybe cookies and milk just make you feel as good now as they did when you were a child.

Diets tend to destroy people's relationship with food because they reaffirm good food/bad food thinking as well as encouraging guilt. They make you believe that controlling food is the route to controlling your body weight. They take away your right to choose the foods you want.

Self-esteem, an all-encompassing word that reflects the beliefs that you hold about yourself, is also a key player in this relationship. Do you see yourself as capable of accomplishing anything you set your mind to? Do you believe you have a right to be treated well? Do you believe you are loving and lovable? Do you believe the path your life takes is determined by your actions and beliefs? Low self-esteem may be at the root if you consistently find yourself in situations that make you unhappy.

Trying to "fix" your eating when food is only serving as a cover-up for underlying issues is counterproductive to health. The three most important elements for successfully restoring a friendly relationship with food are flexibility, awareness and patience. A flexible attitude helps you see that normal eating is simply balancing a variety of foods and quantities of foods in relation to what is available. Increase your awareness of times when you're eating for reasons other than hunger so you can begin to identify what those underlying issues are. And, finally, be patient with yourself as you move along this path of discovery. Progress becomes more evident when you take a casual approach to change.

## ASSERTIVENESS

Asking for what you want, speaking up when you've been hurt and stating your opinions without fear of reprisal are all examples of an assertive communication style. Practicing assertiveness strategies will help you deal with eating issues that stem from unexpressed feelings. Some of the basic tenets include:

- No person's opinion is more important than your own.
- There is no such thing as right or wrong when it comes to opinions.
- When you let someone else hurt you with out speaking up, you are essentially saying that the other person's feelings are more important than your own.
- Conflict is not the same as anger or violence. There is nothing to be afraid of when all that stands between two people is a difference of opinion.

## HEIGHTEN YOUR AWARENESS

By paying attention to when, where, what and how you eat, you may begin to see patterns that explain the why.

- Catch yourself in the act of eating when you're not hungry.
- Don't sneak food; eat the kinds and amounts of food in private that you would publicly.
- Eat without guilt.
- Try to determine what you're hungry for if it's not food.
- Begin to think of eating when you're not hungry as a signal that there's something else going on; seek out the source of the stress instead of beating yourself up for it.

## REWARD YOURSELF

The best way to encourage others is to reward them for their efforts. We can use that same philosophy on ourselves as well, with remarkable results. Rewards help you to acknowledge the process of change, rather than the end result.

The next time you want to honor your progress, you might experiment with one of the following:

- a movie, theater or ballet
- a new item of clothing or exercise attire
- a long-distance phone call to an old friend
- a weekend getaway
- a dinner out at your favorite restaurant
- flowers or a plant
- a picnic in the sun
- a sunset stroll