

Week 4: The Psychology of Eating

The goal of this session is to familiarize the participant with some of the emotional issues surrounding eating, weight loss and weight gain.

Objectives:

By the end of this session, the participant will be able to:

1. Differentiate between mouth hunger and stomach hunger.
2. List four actions that increase awareness of emotionally triggered eating patterns.
3. Demonstrate an ability to communicate assertively, rather than passively or aggressively.
4. Explain the concept of wandering.

Resources:

1. *The THINK LIGHT! Companion Guide*
2. Roth G: *When Food Is Love*, New York, Dutton, 1992.
3. Alberti R, Emmons M: *Your Perfect Right*, San Luis Obispo, CA, Impact Publishers, 1982.

Educational tools

The THINK LIGHT! Companion Guide

Notes:

The Psychology of Eating

Session Outline

I. Greet participants; make introductions.

A. Ice breaker activity.

B. Generate discussion of participants' motivations, successes, challenges and revelations. Discuss the self-study reading and activities they accomplished during the week. What did they learn as a result of their efforts?

C. Introduce this session's topics and explain why they are important.

II. The reasons why we eat are as varied as the kinds of foods we eat.

A. Most of what people have learned about food was learned in childhood. The eating habits they developed, as well as the feelings they've come to associate with food and eating often guide their adult eating behaviors on an unconscious level.

Discussion Questions:

What did you learn about eating and food as a child (e.g., snacking will spoil your appetite, you should always clean your plate, certain foods should only be eaten at certain times, eat three square meals a day, etc.)? What emotions trigger eating (e.g., happiness, sadness, anger, shame, etc.)? What situations trigger eating (e.g., hunger, not standing up for yourself, not expressing your anger, not being honest, procrastination, etc.)?

B. Learn to differentiate between stomach hunger and mouth hunger. Stomach hunger occurs when your body needs more fuel. Mouth hunger occurs when there is an emotional, situational, or historical trigger that leads to eating as a coping mechanism or out of habit.

Discussion Questions:

Ask participants to describe the differences between stomach hunger and mouth hunger. Have them describe both physiological and psychological symptoms.

C. There's nothing wrong with emotional eating. If, however, you are always in situations in which you are eating to cope, and that is the only coping mechanism at your disposal, you may find yourself in a negative pattern that no longer works in your favor. For example, physiologically, sugar stimulates your brain similar to a pleasure inducing drug, giving you a mild, but short-lived high. Often, people crave sugar or chocolate to help them feel better or to cope with emotional situations.

Activity:

Have participants complete the "Eating to Satisfy Your Emotions" exercise in *The THINK LIGHT! Companion Guide*. Discuss results at conclusion.

The Psychology of Eating

D. The next step is to increase your awareness of the emotions, habits and situations that lead to eating patterns you don't desire. Catch yourself in the act of eating when you're not hungry. Try to determine what you're hungry for if it's not food. Avoid the urge to snack on food. Begin to think of eating when you're not hungry as a signal that there's something else going on.

III. Practicing assertive communication helps you deal with eating issues that stem from unexpressed feelings.

A. Aggressive communication: You communicate your needs at the expense of the other person. Includes judgmental, attacking or defensive styles of communication. You "win," but the other person and the relationship "loses."

Passive or passive-aggressive communication: You give in to another person's will at the expense of your own needs or "get even" later. Often passive communication is no communication (i.e., silence or suppressed feelings). You and the relationship "lose," but the other person "wins."

Assertive communication: A balance between communicating your needs and respecting the needs of the other person. Includes standing up for yourself in an honest and open manner, while being sensitive to the other person's needs. Both parties and the relationship "win" in assertive communication.

B. Certain situations call for a mixture of all three communication styles, but the goal is to use the assertive style most often.

Discussion Questions:

Would anyone be willing to share an example of a situation at work or home in which you turned to food because you did not speak up for yourself, allowed someone else to put you down, etc.?

Activity:

Group role play an assertive solution to one or more of the examples given by the participants during the previous discussion.

Discussion Questions:

Have participants list non-useful beliefs they have that interfere with assertive communication (e.g., It's not nice to say no. It's not polite to refuse food. It's not okay to eat what I want in public. If I'm honest I might hurt someone else's feelings. I shouldn't involve other people in my problems. It's too much trouble for the restaurant to prepare my meal in a special way.).

The Psychology of Eating

IV. Healthy eating means resolving your conflicts with food.

A. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to eat. There is no “right” or “wrong” time to eat. There are no “right” or “wrong” foods to eat. Hunger patterns may vary on a day-to-day basis. Food preferences may vary. Food availability may vary. Trying to adhere to rigid rules that don’t take your needs and preferences into consideration is a set-up for failure. It tends to bring on guilt and eventually lead to unhealthy eating patterns such as deprivation and bingeing.

B. There’s no such thing as cheating. There’s only wandering. The wandering concept suggests that if you consider yourself to be on a path, you’re adopting healthier eating habits, there will certainly be times when you will “wander” off the path. You must give yourself unconditional permission to incorporate all of your favorite foods even if they are not considered “healthy.” Wandering is not wrong or bad. There’s no guilt. You wander off the path. You wander back on. It’s a normal way to eat.

C. Starving yourself or overeating as a regular pattern is emotionally and physically debilitating. A lifetime eating plan includes all the foods you normally eat. And it produces a secure and comfortable feeling that food is not your enemy.

Optional Self-Study Projects:

1. Complete the rest of the “Eating to Satisfy Your Emotions” exercise in *The THINK LIGHT! Companion Guide*.
2. Pay attention to the ways you communicate over the next week. Is it passive, aggressive, passive-aggressive or assertive? Does your communication style affect the way you take care of yourself and your body (e.g., If you communicated passively, did you eat afterwards as a way of coping with your feelings)? Are there any changes you want to make?