

## ***Holistic Approaches to Emotional Eating***

By Ryan N. Harrison, MA

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*Miranda trudges her way up the stairs to her second-story apartment, exhausted after a day's abuse at a job that she grew tired of three years ago. Dropping her purse on the table, she hypnotically makes her way to the kitchen where, before she is even aware of it, she has opened the freezer, pulled out the triple-chocolate ice cream and has downed a third spoonful. "There goes my diet." Realizing her mistake three bites too late, she shrugs and skulks to the couch, hugging the ice cream carton closer as she settles down to start flipping through channels on the TV.*

Sound familiar? How often have you stumbled to the kitchen, thrown wide the refrigerator door, and looked for something – *anything* – to put into your mouth as a way to feel better? At the top of this list are probably things like ice cream and chocolate, two “comfort foods” that typically taste great, but pack more of an unhealthy punch than they are really worth. We know this. We’ve read it in magazines, heard about it on the radio, and have seen news reports all about the health dangers associated with the sweet treats that we like to give ourselves when we need a fix. And yet, even though we logically know better, we continue to buy that candy bar or indulge in our favorite dessert.

Do you eat when you’re not hungry? Do you overeat on a frequent basis? Do you eat when you are bored, angry, sad, excited, or depressed? “Emotional eating” is the term given to a set of habits that all come down to the same point: food is consumed in response to feelings instead of hunger. This problem is widespread; if you find that you relate to this more easily than you wish, you can rest assured you’re certainly not alone. And that there’s hope.

Several factors may contribute to emotional eating. A poor diet can lead to carbohydrate addiction and low levels of mood-boosting neurotransmitters. A depressed emotional state can affect energy and motivation to make healthy choices. A downtrodden spirit may not even recognize a need to pursue health. Just as any combination of these things – an ill body, mind or spirit – can manifest as emotional eating, positively affecting one of them can cause a healthy ripple effect that helps heal the others. Healthy living is an holistic affair. Here are my suggestions for how to work with emotional eating.

### **Body**

Good nutrition is *always* the basis of good physical health. Assuming your digestive system is in good working order, you really *are* what you eat. Additionally, your body is primed to crave more and more of what you give it. If you eat loads of sugars, that’s what it will want. Likewise, start feeding it fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and you’ll see a shift in your cravings toward those foods. A good nutritional consultant can help you determine what foods will help you turn around a cycle of poor food choices.

Exercise in proper amounts will energize you on many levels. It helps stabilize the appetite and boost the metabolism. A stronger, healthier body will also help you feel good about yourself and motivate you to stay active and make positive food choices. Even a small amount of exercise can make a big difference.

### **Mind**

Mental and emotional concerns are at the center of emotional eating. Negative emotions in particular tend to fuel overeating and poor food choices. One of the things that our modernized food production capabilities have done is changed our relationship with food. Now, a growing number of people have developed an unhealthy relationship to food, viewing it as a reward, compensation, or activity, rather than what food actually is meant to be: *fuel*. If you find yourself repeatedly craving certain foods in direct relation to an emotion, chances are that you could use a bit of healing.

Fortunately, emotionally-based addictions are now very treatable. A growing body of techniques centered in the field of Energy Psychology can help transform the emotional energy around addictions. Therapies Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) are swiftly becoming widely practiced and accepted as powerful tools with which you can retrain your mind and constructively manage emotions. In conjunction with traditional counseling or other therapies such as hypnotherapy or the use of positive affirmations, energy psychology techniques can be incredibly effective at curbing emotional eating.

### **Spirit**

Connecting with something deeper than yourself can have a very healing affect. Ironically, the rapidly growing technological world has had an isolating effect and the resulting disconnect is one that many people feel on a deep or even subconscious level. Yet research continues to suggest that a healthy sense of personal spirituality is a powerful ally in making and sustaining positive lifestyle changes. As you work to transform patterns of emotional eating into healthy living, developing a deeper sense of self and spirituality can only strengthen your resolve, boost your results, and provide calm direction in moments of temptation.

Building spiritual strength can be easy, though it takes dedication, whichever path you choose. Remember that the result is well worth the effort! An active prayer life or meditation practice can help calm internal dialogue and help you connect with your deeper self. Frequent journaling or artistic expressions (such as painting, singing or dancing) are wonderful ways to explore your truest feelings, thoughts and ideas. Active people enjoy yoga, tai chi, and martial arts as spiritual disciplines which also engage the body and mind. Whatever your choice, taking the time to connect with and expand your inner landscape and relationship to something greater than yourself can help you find your center and utilize untapped strengths and resources to help you overcome emotional eating.