

HEALTHSTYLE™

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MANAGE YOUR FEELINGS- MANAGE YOUR WEIGHT

Obesity among American adults and children is at an all time high. It represents a major health problem for individuals and society and the major cause for increasing health care costs. One in three adult Americans are now considered to be obese. Increasing numbers are fighting the battle of the bulge and losing. For adults the weight problems probably crept up over their adult life. Often it is largely ignored due to other personal priorities until it results in weight related diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, failing knees, low energy and shortness of breath. By the time these diseases are diagnosed the prospect of losing all of this weight feels overwhelming. Being overweight or obese for a long period of time can also lead to depression, discouragement and anxiety. Eating has always been associated with good feelings so, when people feel bad, they may eat even more. In this way using food becomes a self-destructive cycle.

Food may be associated with pleasure and comfort than hunger very early in life. When we were babies we were often comforted with a bottle. Children are often rewarded for good behavior with sweets and chicken nuggets. Many of our social activities revolve around food. Children who are overweight and teased by children at school quickly learn to use food to temporarily feel better. It is little wonder that we make the learned association between food and rewarding ourselves, feeling better, having friends or immediate gratification. However the trouble starts when food is used to reduce feelings of isolation, combat depression or anxiety, something to do or to just feel good temporarily. Using food to solve these problems often leads to becoming overweight or obese. People who use food this way get only the temporary rush from the sugar or carbohydrates, much like the use of a drug. And like a drug, it is followed by depression and guilt for having lost control again.

Often the "food for feelings" routine is not recognized by adults who use it this way. Insight may only come after a therapist points out that eating large amounts of food or unhealthy foods occurs at times of difficulty coping with emotions including depression, disappointment and even happiness. People also use food to increase happy feelings and celebrate. It seems that our use of food for all things is pervasive and sanctioned by society to some extent.

What can a person do when they are surrounded with something that is not only necessary but can also be toxic? To change this it might be helpful to look at how you eat. If you eat when you are not hungry then you are probably eating for boredom, loneliness, anxiety, depression, frustration, disappointment or even happiness. You are using food for something other than nourishment of the body. It is also common to choose the worst kinds of foods to feel better. This includes the high calorie, high fat, high carbohydrate and high salt foods that often come packaged for easy consumption.

To stop these unhealthy eating habits you can start by paying attention to foods you are eating and when you are eating them. Notice what feelings you are having when you eat. How fast do you eat? If

you start "conscious eating" you can start to develop ways of changing these patterns. This may seem like a lot of work at first and inconvenient but it is the first step in managing food instead of being a victim of it. Create a food/feelings journal. Notice how you deal with the feelings. Do you eat high sugar, high carbohydrate, or high calorie foods when you are feeling down or bored? How do you feel immediately after you use food? Do you feel happy or guilt for once more having lost control. How do you feel hours later or the next day? When does your eating start a self-destructive cycle, resulting in feelings of shame —and even more eating?

Relapse prevention involves identifying triggers for eating for coping and identifying substitute healthy behaviors.

- If you are eating for boredom make a list of more constructive activities to do when you feel this way. If it is mindless eating start to pay attention to this.
- If you eat when you are anxious try some relaxation strategies such as deep breathing, yoga , progressive muscle relaxation, and physical exercise.
- Many people eat because they are feeling lonely. If this is the case get involved. Volunteer at a charity or find a social activity at church or in the community.
- If depression is your eating trigger try to identify if there is a cause. See if you can solve the problem. Talk to someone or see a therapist instead of ruminating about it.

It is important that you redefine the role of food in your life. It is not your best friend. It is an unpredictable lover---- creating immediate good feelings and often leaving you with emptiness . It is really supposed to be there to provide nourishment and energy. It is the fuel you need to get going and carry on the really important things you have to do in life.

**Dr. Gannon provides psychological evaluations of bariatric surgery candidates .*