

Emotional Eating

by | Matthew McNutt

[Tending|the Temple]



I'm not thrilled to admit this, but I'm an emotional eater.

Granted, it's a lot easier to tell you that since, as far as I know, I never teased you about it...unlike my wife, whom I picked on without mercy for years about her chocolate dependency. Her life was filled with an immeasurable joy the day I admitted my own reliance on food to manage my mood.

Honestly, it was never even on my radar that I used food as a coping mechanism. I just thought I really liked having pizza and ice cream multiple times a day—I mean come on, who doesn't?

Emotion Journal

Then I signed on for *Biggest Loser*, and besides all the obvious stuff that you see on TV—the screaming, sweating, starving, and lusting after doughnuts—there was a bunch of behind-the-scenes homework going on, including an “emotion journal.” Basically, we had to keep a diary about our non-hunger related cravings that we experienced throughout the day and how we felt at the time.

This accomplished a couple of things. First, it taught me to *think* about what was going on with my body when I felt like eating—to evaluate whether or not I was actually, *physiologically* hungry. Second, it revealed my emotional eating issues.

Coping Mechanism

It didn't take long to notice a pattern in my cravings. When I'm tired, frustrated, upset, overwhelmed, or feeling down on myself, I start thinking about pizza, ice cream, chips, or pretty much anything deep-fried. There are times when it's almost overwhelming. In many ways, emotional eating is

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like a lot of other coping mechanisms: Drugs, alcohol, compulsive shopping, self-injury, you name it. It's a temporary way to feel better that in the long run actually makes us feel worse about ourselves.

If I have a bad run in with a deacon, feel upset, and then go drown my sorrows in a bucket of Ben & Jerry's (Cherry Garcia can fix anything, right?), I still have to deal with the situation once the ice cream is gone. And now I've actually added

to my woes because now I feel guilty for bingeing! I was stunned to discover that I used food for comfort all the time.

Comfort Compulsion

Here's where it really hit home for me, though—and maybe my idolatry is not news for you, but it definitely rocked my boat: I was a pastor, a minister of God, a man of the cloth, the guy who's supposed to be setting an example as a shepherd to the flock—yet my consistent, natural response in a time of need was to turn to junk food for support rather than to God.

That realization terrifies and shames me. And it wasn't just everyday needs; it was even in my “church stuff.” Whether it was a bad meeting with the senior pastor, an upset parent, a teen who needed to be confronted, last-minute stress before a retreat, or leaders going off the deep end, I used food to cope. I'd even plan ahead and pick up the junk from the supermarket on my way to the stressful meeting so I could have it ready afterward!

Like most unhealthy dependencies, the compulsion to eat for comfort doesn't just go away. In fact, it's a much deeper issue than just getting rid of the temptations and “will powering” our way through it. If the core issue of where comfort is found isn't dealt with and the focus is simply the unhealthy eating habits, the dependence can be transferred to something else.

It's not unusual to find people who've lost a lot of weight becoming compulsive shoppers, addicted to exercise, or some other obsessive behavior. They haven't dealt with where they find their comfort; they've just transferred it to another activity. It's kind of like that passage in Matthew 12 where Jesus warns us that it's not enough to just cast something out; that space in someone's life has to be re-filled with God, or in the long run it'll be even worse than before. This brings us back to emotional eating (or any other compulsion). It's not enough to just diet, “will power” it away, or find some sort of replacement coping mechanism. We need to prioritize the discipline of reaching out to God for comfort—so that in time our natural response during periods of frustration, anger, stress, anxiety, depression, or whatever else, will be to turn to God for a comfort that'll actually improve the situation, not just temporarily “scratch the itch” and then pile on long-term consequences. 🍌



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