**Emotional Eating**

Have you gained the “quarantine 15”? The COVID-19 pandemic has created the perfect storm for weight gain: constant proximity to the kitchen, limitations on physical activity, and stress! Although the first two (calories consumed and calories burned) would seem like the most logical explanation for weight gain, it’s the stress that is actually causing weight gain for many. Anxiety, stress, frustration, and other difficult emotions are the hallmark of this pandemic, and many of us deal with these emotions by eating.

Are you “emotional eating” during quarantine? You are not alone. Emotional eating is when we eat not to satisfy a physical hunger, but to satisfy an emotional need for comfort or reward. Unfortunately, emotional eating doesn’t fix emotional problems. In fact, it usually makes us feel worse in the long run.

How can you make sure you’re eating for physical nutrition instead of emotional reward? Follow these three steps:

**Step 1: Pause before eating:** Emotional eating tends to be automatic and mindless. Before you even realize what you’re doing, you’ve reached for a tub of ice cream and polished off half of it. But if you can take a moment to pause and reflect when you are hit with a craving, you give yourself the opportunity to make a different decision. Try to pause for five minutes before eating. During that time, go for a walk, meditate, or listen to music. Even if you do end up eating, you may give yourself time to make a healthier food selection and understand what hunger you’re really feeding.

**Step 2: Recognize what you’re feeling:** While you’re taking a pause before eating, check in with yourself. How are you feeling? What’s going on emotionally? Reflect on your day and where you are emotionally in this moment. Even if you end up eating, you’ll have a better understanding of why you did it. This can help you set yourself up for a different response next time.

**Step 3: Accept your feelings—even the bad ones.** Comfort food makes us feel good (hence the word “comfort”). It makes the bad feeling go away (temporarily) and makes us feel better (again... temporarily). So why would we want to stop pursuing comfort and start feeling bad? Because, as noted, that comfort is temporary, the bad feelings will come back probably even more acutely, and emotional eating can cause a whole new set of bad feelings. When we learn to feel the bad feelings, we find that they too are temporary, and that when we cope with them in the moment, they won’t keep coming back day after day.

Steps 1 – 3 sound real easy on paper. But they’re not. They’re hard. So here are some other tips to help adjust your relationship with food so that you can feel more nurtured and healthy:

**Savor your food.** When you eat to feed your feelings, you tend to do so quickly, mindlessly consuming food on autopilot. You eat so fast you miss out on the different tastes and textures of your food—as well as your body’s cues that you’re full and no longer hungry. By slowing down and savoring every bite, you’ll not only enjoy your food more, but you’ll also be less likely to overeat. Slow down by taking a few deep breaths before starting your food, putting your utensils down between bites, and really focusing on the experience of eating.

**Keep a food journal.** Every time you feel compelled to reach for comfort food, write down how you’re feeling. Are you actually experiencing physical sensations of hunger? What emotions are bubbling up? What experiences have you had that day. You can also jot down how you’re feeling after you eat. Overtime, you’ll see some patterns emerge that will help you identify what’s really going on.

**Maintain healthy habits.** Regular exercise, rest, and self-care routines are all important strategies for coping with the difficult emotions that inspire emotional eating. By maintain a routine that include healthy habits, you’ll reduce the difficult emotions that cause you to turn to food in the first place.

If you are struggling with emotional eating, difficult emotions related to the pandemic or other life stressors, contact Family Services EAP for FREE and CONFIDENTIAL appointments. Call 978-327-6666, email info@FamilyServicesEAP.org or submit an inquiry online at FamilyServicesEAP.org.