

Stress and Weight Gain



We all deal with different levels of stress. An acceptable level of stress can be productive in that it increases our working capacity. But when it gets to an uncontrollable level, it can be harmful to our health, and lead to weight gain.

It is important for us to recognize and resist addictions and other unhealthy ways of coping with stress like emotional eating as these will compound the negative impacts of stress on our health. To some people, stress tends to influence how much and what type of food they consume, which links to emotional eating. The following are some of the main reasons (besides hunger) that stressed people eat:

Cortisol: The body's natural survival mechanism triggers our body to release higher level of cortisol (stress hormone) when we feel stressed. Excessive levels of cortisol as a result of chronic stress can create cravings for energy-dense food such as those high in sugar and fat. These include sweets, processed food and other foods that are typically less healthy and lead to increased weight gain. The body's natural survival mechanism enables people to consume foods that would sustain life when food is scarce. However, in modern day times when food is rarely scarce but we face stresses from work or social life, this adaptive mechanism causes weight gain instead.

Social eating: It is common for people under stress, especially females, to seek out social support. However, this social support usually ends up with going out for a nice meal, or crying on a friend's shoulder over a piece of cheesecake.

Nervous eating: When stressed or anxious, many people tend to eat, just munch on junk food or drink a soda to give their mouths something to do.

Comforting memories: Do you remember those sweets, ice cream cone, cookies and favourite meal your parents or grandparents used to reward you with when you were small? People develop emotional attachments to food while growing up. People eat to celebrate, eat to feel better during hard times, and even worse, eat to deal with the stress of being overweight. During times of stress, all these favourite foods become powerful comforters. People use food to take the focus off any anger,

frustration, resentment, fear, anxiety and a whole lot of other emotions that they would rather not feel.

Lack of time: When people are too stressed and busy, they increase the frequency of eating out in restaurants and fast food areas, rather than preparing healthy dinners at home. Being too busy and having no time are often excuses for inadequate physical activity and a sedentary lifestyle.

If you think you are an emotional eater, it is important for you to be aware of your triggers and develop some effective coping skills so that your body can stay healthy.

Healthy Alternatives

If it seems too hard to control your cravings when stressed, try to stay with healthy snacks with a lot of fiber, some healthy fats, some protein and less sugar. For example, you can choose veggie sticks over chips, have fresh whole fruit or dried fruits which have no added sugar, or have a dozen of roasted almond, walnut or pecan which have a high fiber content. These nuts are good sources of monounsaturated fatty acid which is good for your heart but you should watch out the amount you eat as they are also high in calories. Air popped popcorn is another good choice as 3 cups of air popped popcorn has 3.5 g fiber and 100 calories only, the fiber can keep you feeling full. Instead of adding butter, you can spray it with olive oil and some seasonings such as cinnamon, garlic or onion powder.

Sugar free soda and sparkling water with a piece of lemon are good alternatives to regular soft drinks. Savoring a small piece of dark chocolate instead of binging on a whole chocolate muffin will let you feel less deprived. Low fat yogurt with fresh fruit pieces can be a sweet treat with a good source of protein, fiber and calcium. Finally, there is always sugar free gum to choose when you are really not hungry but want something to chew on to release some of that stress.

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