

KID'S Corner

LEARN TO HAVE A HEALTHIER RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD

by Mari W. Broome, MSW, LCSW



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Being a teenager is tough! I can tell you that firsthand. I was 13 years old when I started developing unhealthy eating habits due to stress associated with school, trying to fit-in and family problems. I didn't know how important practicing healthy eating habits were until it was almost too late. There became a time where my health was of serious concern because of my unhealthy relationship with food.

YOUR EMOTIONS AND FOOD

A lot of focus is placed on what a person eats and how they eat it (Do they eat a lot at one time or maybe only a little?). Still, it's just as important to understand why we eat certain foods and why we choose certain eating behaviors because this can directly affect our self-esteem and emotional behavior. It can also affect how we perform on tests and homework and even how we interact with our peers.

As a psychotherapist, I work with many people who struggle with concerns related to food. One commonality amongst these individuals is that they use food to deal with their emotions, such as:

- **STRESS**
- **ANGER**
- **SADNESS**
- **BOREDOM**
- **AND EVEN HAPPINESS**

And let's be real! Life can be stressful and overwhelming... school, tests, homework, work, friends and even family! As teenagers, you go through many life changes where you may feel alone; where no one really understands you. At times like these, it is very common to turn to food for comfort. Food is all around us, so it's one of the easiest things to turn to when we are feeling these emotions.

"THE FOODS MANY OF US TURN TO ARE FULL OF SUGAR, WHICH SIGNAL FEEL-GOOD RECEPTORS IN OUR BRAIN."

TURNING TO FOOD FOR COMFORT

The foods many of us turn to are full of sugar, which signal feel-good receptors in our brain. What does this do? It makes us feel good, and in turn, makes us want to keep eating. Unfortunately, our brain is tricking us into engaging in unhealthy eating habits. The good news is there are other healthy choices that can also stimulate those feel-good receptors in our brains. When we use those healthier choices, we will be able to find a healthy relationship with

food, using it to strengthen our body instead of harming it. Developing these healthy habits early-on will last a lifetime and will naturally become a part of your lifestyle.

Is it OK to eat sugary foods every once in a while? Of course! It's important to treat yourself! The difference now will be that you can actually enjoy it for what it is instead of using it to deal with your emotions. Now maybe you will be able to see if you are eating a whole bag of potato chips because you are bored or eating a piece of chocolate because you appreciate the taste...because it's delicious!



KEEP A FOOD JOURNAL

Are you using food to deal with your emotions? A great way to figure this out is to start a food and emotion journal to monitor what and why you are eating. It will help you start to notice the connection between the two. This will also help you learn to eat when you are physically hungry rather than eating when you are emotionally hungry. Also, start to notice the foods you are eating when you are bored, tired, stressed, etc. Try to write down everything you eat and drink. It may look something like this (for "Hunger Level," use the number "1" for when you're least hungry and use "10" for when you're very hungry):

WHAT I'M EATING	DAY/TIME	LOCATION	SITUATION/MOOD	HUNGER LEVEL (SCALE OF 1-10)
POPCORN	MONDAY, 5PM	HOME	WATCHING TV, BORED	2
CHICKEN, VEGGIES, CORN BREAD	MONDAY, 7PM	HOME	DINNER, CONTENT	10
SNICKERS BAR, SODA	MONDAY, 10PM	CONVENIENCE STORE	LEFT THE HOUSE BECAUSE I WAS MAD AT MY MOM	1

My food and emotion journal clearly shows that I like sweet and salty foods when I am going through different emotions. Does this mean that popcorn, snickers and soda are bad? Absolutely not! But the reasons I am eating these foods are not for healthy reasons. I am not eating them to indulge and enjoy or because I am hungry; I am eating them because I am emotionally hungry, specifically bored and angry. Now that I know I am sometimes using food to deal with my emotions, what can I do about it? Write down activities you enjoy doing; things that make you happy. These can be used as your healthy coping strategies. Here are some examples:

HEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES

- Physical Activity – bike, tennis, swimming, skateboarding, trampoline, football, basketball, dancing, etc.
- Singing
- Drawing and/or painting
- Other arts and crafts (You can find some cool ideas on Pinterest!)
- Reading
- Board games
- Yoga
- Sidewalk chalk
- Play outside
- Taking a walk with your parents
- Play with your pet
- Enjoy nature... Play in the rain
- Use your imagination
- Talk it out
- Getting support from a parent, a friend, a counselor, a teacher

FAMILY FOCUS



Did having that snickers bar and soda help me deal with my situation with my mom? Not likely. It actually just made me more upset and made me crave more sweets because my mom and I were still in an argument. Now that I am thinking about it, maybe it would have been better to cool off by taking a walk and listening to my favorite music. Once I cool off, I should probably have a conversation with my mom instead of just holding it in and never dealing with it because that will come back to affect me later!

Your family is the primary role model when it comes to eating habits, levels of physical activity and healthy communication. Researchers agree that long-term and short-term success rates are much higher when families are involved in programs designed to help children work on their eating habits and activity levels.



IDEAS TO GIVE YOUR PARENTS

- Make dinner together
- Plan to eat dinner at the table together with no television
- Plant a garden of fresh fruits and vegetables
- “Practice what you preach” – If you want me to make healthier choices, show me how!
- Education on healthy choices
- Let’s talk!

CONCLUSION

Overall, health and wellness encourages healthy attitudes and helps improve academic, social and emotional performance, which also helps you improve how you feel about yourself. This really is about the whole person and not just about what you are eating. It’s so important to identify your eating habits so you can change your lifestyle to be able to live a happier and more balanced life.

Parents and children: Give each other the tools to understand what healthy choices are and how to appropriately deal with your emotions. It may take time and hard work to make this change, but the result will make it all worth it. If you need extra support, connect with a psychotherapist and/or a dietitian. Many school counselors or PE coaches can also help you find resources!

About the Author:

Mari Broome, MSW, LCSW, is a psychotherapist providing counseling to children, adolescents and adults. She specializes in the areas of body image, eating disorders/obesity, and overall health and wellness. She graduated from the University of Florida with a degree in Exercise and Sports Sciences: Fitness/Wellness prior to obtaining her license so that she could provide a more holistic approach to treatment. She is also an Integrative Yoga Therapy Teacher and Children’s Yoga Teacher and incorporates these practices within her practice.





ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



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LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



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info@obesityaction.org

(800) 717-3117 | (813) 872-7835 | Fax: (813) 873-7838



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