Emotional Eating

Do you find yourself feeling out of control around food?
Do you eat out of boredom or loneliness?
Do you eat to soothe yourself in stressful situations?

If you answered yes to any of these questions you are not alone. Emotional eating is a widespread and longstanding problem that many nutrition and mental health professionals are addressing on a regular basis. This is not surprising since one of our earliest unconscious lessons equated food with comfort. As children we were often praised for finishing the food on our plates and rewarded with sweets for good behaviour. When food is such an easy and accessible tension reliever it is easy to understand how we can unconsciously reinforce this pattern of emotional avoidance as we grow older. Eating distracts us from problem solving or focusing on why we feel badly. As a result we end up not really knowing how to resolve unpleasant feelings. Learning how to deal with emotions without the use of food is a skill many of us still need to develop.

Emotional eating is invariably tied to one or more of these areas: stress at home, work, or school; loneliness or depression; boredom or disappointment; fear of failure or success; or deeper results of trauma or low self-esteem. Emotional eating is a mindless activity, meaning it is often so automatic that we don't realize how much we are needlessly consuming. In order to break the pattern of emotional eating we must therefore become more mindful and aware.

If emotional eating is a concern for you, consider the following:

1) Keep a food diary to record what you eat as well as how you feel before and after eating. Often people who can't sit quietly with loneliness or solitude tend to seek out pleasure or escape through a bowl of ice cream or bag of chips. Ask yourself what's going on in those moments when you turn instinctively to food and do not berate yourself for making poor choices. Instead congratulate yourself when you begin to notice the patterns that emerge.
2) Cultivate a healthier relationship with food by practicing eating with no distractions. Avoid eating in front of the television or computer or while engaged in stressful interactions. Instead sit in a quiet calm space and consciously slow your pace, savoring the taste, aroma, colour and texture of the food you are eating. This not only puts you in control of food (instead of the other way around), but also increases the chances that you will recognize when you are full.

3) Consider beginning a mindfulness practice such as meditation or yoga. Research is increasingly demonstrating the multitude of health benefits of breath work and visualization. If these do not appeal to you simply pay attention to your thoughts, actions and bodily sensations on a more regular basis. Many of us spend our busy days on autopilot and we tend to become desensitized to signals our bodies are sending us. Even pausing for five minutes to breathe fully and pay attention to our body helps us become more mindful. Cultivating gratitude can also help to influence our relationship with food. It's important for us to be able to see what we already have, to feel gratitude instead of using food to make us feel good.

4) Re-train your brain: Instead of compulsively reaching for food allow yourself to get hungry (not starving as this can lead to overeating). Wait 10 minutes before eating to assess whether you are truly hungry or eating mindlessly, or consider rating your level of hunger from 1-10 with 1 being slightly hungry and 10 being 'feeling starved'. Ideally the number should fall midway.

5) Develop healthy habits:
   - Do not skip meals. This disrupts your blood sugar and your metabolism.
   - Drink plenty of water to stay hydrated. Often when we feel hungry we are in fact dehydrated.
   - Create a healthy food environment. It is less likely you will indulge in mindless late night eating when you have to the store to buy junk food. When you do have tempting foods on hand divide and store them in smaller portions to lessen the chances of overeating.
   - Get enough sleep. People who fail to sleep properly over-stimulate their production of ghrelin, a hormone that increases the desire for food. A lack of sleep also reduces the production of the hormone leptin, which acts as the body's appetite suppressant. Being sleep deprived might leave you thinking you are hungry when in fact you do not need food.
   - Junk foods often contain properties that cause biochemical reactions that mimic a 'high', temporarily elevating our mood. Invite yourself to come up with a list of healthier ways to feel good. These can include social connections, new activities, or soothing rituals. Commit to putting the list first when reaching to food for comfort.

If you've tried self-help options but you still can't get control of your emotional eating, consider therapy with a professional mental health provider. Therapy can help you to understand the motivations behind emotional eating, and can also uncover additional issues that could be contributing to a lack of success at maintaining a healthy weight or establishing a healthy relationship with food.