

Coping strategies: emotional eating

Introduction

We all experience stress and emotional pain in our life, but we all cope in different ways.

Coping mechanisms and coping strategies are things we do to try and protect ourselves from stress, anxiety, trauma, or any other mental health challenge. They could include anything from scrolling our mobile phones and running marathons to excess drinking or gambling. The aim of these behaviours is always to escape the emotional discomfort we're experiencing.

Some coping strategies may help in the short-term, but go on to cause harm longer term. Some coping mechanisms don't have the same long-term cost on our health.

Ideally, any coping behaviour would lead to the problem being resolved in a way that reduces stress and harm. You can find tips and advice on beneficial coping strategies, good self-care, and wellbeing in our resources [here](#).

This resource considers some coping strategies that might cause longer term harm or distress. With these types of coping strategies it helps to be mindful of how you use them, in order to avoid longer term harm. Not everyone who enjoys an alcoholic drink after a stressful day will become an alcoholic, but it's beneficial to be aware of when a habit stops being helpful.

We'll explore how to spot the signs of harm in yourself or a colleagues and where to get support if it's needed.



What are these coping strategies?

We're all human, and it is not uncommon to cope with the stress and difficult life events with behaviours that don't necessarily benefit us in the long term.

These may include:

- Self-harm or risky behaviour
- Addiction - to drugs, alcohol, gambling
- Over eating, emotional eating or binge eating
- Alcohol consumption - including excessive drinking outside of regular social situations
- Spending and shopping - in a way that harms your financial situation or home life
- Gambling in bookies or, increasingly, online

The examples above are generalisations and people may use other coping strategies.

Generally, a behaviour can be defined as destructive if engaging in it leads to some kind of harm to you or others.

A note on coping strategies that support you

Education Support has a range of [resources](#) to help you look after yourself and prioritise your wellbeing – even during times of great stress.

It's important to remember that it is definitely possible to learn new coping strategies if you're worried that yours are causing you harm. An important starting point is awareness of your stress levels, and how you usually cope.

If you are engaging in harmful behaviours to help you cope with difficult situations, or are worried about how you are coping, professional support may help.

Sometimes a feeling of shame can prevent us from seeking support, so finding a trusted person – professional or otherwise – to talk things through can be a helpful starting point.

Below are a few examples of alternative coping strategies that it can be helpful to explore if you are worried that your current ones aren't helping you.

There are many more and these are often personal to people. Finding out what works for you is an important part of managing your wellbeing.

- Spending time with people you care about and who care about you e.g. close colleagues, friends and family
- Doing activities you enjoy or following your passions
- Exercise and keeping active - this doesn't have to be marathon running, just moving your body in a way that's enjoyable
- Finding people you can trust to talk to about any worries you may have
- Caring for your body by feeding it enough of the nutrients it needs
- Giving yourself permission to rest properly – not all your time has to be dedicated to doing things
- Relaxation, mindfulness and meditation



If you would like to take action to change your coping strategies but don't know where to start you can **phone the Education Support Helpline for free:**

UK-wide: 08000 562 561 day or night

Text: 07909 341229 (answered within 24 hrs)

Emotional eating as a coping strategy

What is it?

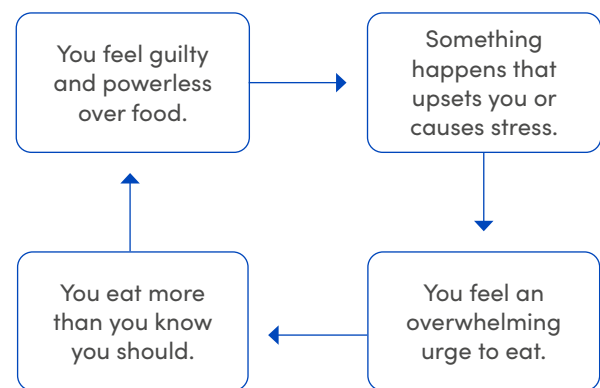
As social beings, a lot of the eating we do has an emotional component. Think about birthday cakes, funeral buffets and connecting with loved ones over dinner. Food is fully present at many of life's most emotional moments. We can therefore say that most of us emotionally eat in some capacity, but when does it stop enhancing our lives?

Taking pleasure from food and enjoying treats is not something to be concerned about (and in fact, a nice part of life!) but it's important to be fully aware of how we relate to food in moments of stress, grief or anxiety. This is especially true for educators working in high stress environments. Working in schools can mean that normal eating patterns and habits are disrupted and it can be challenging to maintain healthy eating habits in busy work environments.

Eating behaviours and patterns are influenced by our mood and emotional state, and we don't always eat purely because of physical hunger. Many people use food as a reward, comfort or to relieve stress. Emotional eating, which can also be described as comfort eating, overeating, or binge eating, is using food to make yourself feel 'better' or different. It happens because the body's stress response involves the release of a hormone that increases hunger and cravings for high energy, high calorie food.

As with other emotional coping strategies, difficult or stressful situations and complex emotions can lead to people feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope.

Emotional eating can act as a short term fix to these feelings, but it may exacerbate it by provoking feelings of shame and guilt. The **Emotional Eating Cycle** is illustrated here:



Common causes of emotional eating include:

- Stress (as explained above)
- A desire to regulate (or avoid!) your emotions
- Feelings of despondency, boredom and lack of fulfilment - food can occupy you temporarily and gives you something to focus on
- Childhood habits - if you were rewarded or punished using food, this can be a cause

Emotional eating isn't the same as an eating disorder (ED), but if left unchecked can escalate into something more serious, including EDs like binge eating disorder.

EDs are serious mental health conditions involving severe eating behaviours and can take various forms, such as anorexia, bulimia and binge eating disorder.

If you feel that you no longer have control of your relationship with food, don't hesitate to seek support. Your GP and the **BEAT** advice and support line can offer you immediate help.

Spotting the signs in yourself and others

Being aware of your stress levels and the ways you manage situations in school and at home is vital for staying mentally healthy. We know this can be a challenge and we can find ourselves using food to cope.

The symptoms and signs of emotional eating will vary from person to person. But the following questions may help you to assess whether you need support:

- Do you eat more when you're feeling stressed?
- Can you eat without really noticing?
- Do you eat when you're not hungry or continue to when you're full?
- Do you eat to feel better or to soothe your emotions (when you're sad, angry, bored, anxious, etc.)?
- Do you reward yourself with food?
- Do you regularly eat until you feel uncomfortably full?

- Does food make you feel safe?
- Do you feel out of control around food?
- Do you have obsessive thoughts about particular foods?
- Are you unable to control your consumption of certain foods?

Other signs may include:

- Rapid weight gain or weight fluctuations
- Intake of large amounts of food on a regular basis
- Feelings or expressions of guilt and shame in relation to food
- Low mood, irritability and lack of focus
- Hiding food or eating secretly
- Having certain foods that you cannot keep in the house for fear of losing control



Becoming more conscious of the way we eat, and finding different ways to manage stress can help us cope in a way that doesn't cause longer-term guilt, shame or harm.



Physical and emotional hunger are different

Here are some of the differences between them, which might help you to spot signs of emotional eating:

Emotional hunger

Emotional hunger craves specific comfort foods

Emotional eating can trigger feelings of guilt, powerlessness, and shame

Emotional hunger isn't satisfied with a full stomach

Emotional hunger feels like it needs to be satisfied instantly and can be all consuming

Emotional hunger comes on suddenly



Physical hunger

Physical hunger is open to options – lots of things sound good

Eating to satisfy physical hunger may not make you feel bad about yourself

Physical hunger stops when you're full

Physical hunger can wait

Physical hunger comes on gradually

What are the next steps

Being aware of your relationship with food, and of your stress levels, is all part of maintaining and managing your wellbeing. It is possible to control emotional eating, with better awareness and stress management.

Realising there may be a problem is the first step to ensuring you don't use food to cope with stress or other difficult emotions.

There are different ways people can rebuild their eating habits themselves. If you are concerned you might have an eating disorder, such as binge eating disorder, you can see your GP or contact an organisation that specialises in helping people with eating disorders. Some examples are listed further on in this resource.



For yourself

When negative emotions threaten to trigger emotional eating, you can take steps to control cravings. If you are concerned for yourself or would like to change the relationship between stress and food that you experience then you can try these specific tips:



If you try these things but find it hard, seeking support and talking to others may be a good idea.

Emotional eating can happen because you don't have a support network - building one with close colleagues, friends or family can help.

Seeing your GP is a good place to start if you're concerned about your eating habits or mental health. If you think you may have an eating disorder you can read more about this [here](#).

For your colleagues

If you are concerned for a colleague at school, then be aware that people who engage in emotional eating often feel guilt and shame about this. They are likely emotionally eating because they are struggling or in some kind of emotional pain – so always prioritise being kind and compassionate. They may feel shame that can prevent them from acknowledging or accepting the need for help. Be patient with them.

There are some sources of support below for people who are close to those experiencing problems with emotional eating. You may also want to talk to a Union representative, confidentially, about what steps to take next.

If you do decide to have a conversation with a colleague about what you've noticed here are some suggestions of how to do this in a safe way:

- Make sure you speak in a private place where you won't be interrupted
- Do not have the conversation in front of any other colleagues, including those in management
- Remember that most people who emotionally eat do so because they are struggling: be kind
- Do not use accusatory or judgemental language and keep an open mind at all times
- Present your concern for their wellbeing
- Stick to the facts about the behaviours or patterns you have noticed
- Ask what you can do to help
- Signpost to support using information here.



You don't need to be an expert or qualified professional to be able to listen or signpost a colleague to support if they need it.

Coping strategies sources:

1. careinmind.com.au
2. www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk

Eating habits sources:

1. www.counselling-directory.org.uk/memberarticles/overeating-as-a-coping-mechanism-bing-eating-disorder#accept-cookies
2. www.helpguide.org/articles/diets/emotional-eating.htm
3. www.center4research.org/stress-binge-eating-avoid/
4. www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/binge-eating/overview/
5. www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/weight-loss/in-depth/weight-loss/art-20047342

For school leaders

School leaders benefit from ensuring their staff have adequate time available to refuel healthily throughout the busy school day. Developing and enacting policies that include considerations relating to healthy eating and break times for staff, in consultation with staff or health and safety representatives, is important. This may be included as part of wider occupational health and safety policies, including stress management policies. These policies should recognise that excessive stress, which can be caused by very heavy workloads, unclear or unreasonable demands of staff, or workplace conflict, can lead to the development of unhealthy coping strategies such as comfort eating and emotional eating. Policies would and should include employers obligations to look after employees' wellbeing and what support is available to anyone who may be experiencing problems.

If you are in a position within your school to suggest, lead or contribute to awareness raising activities about unhealthy coping mechanisms including emotional eating, promote healthy eating habits and practices, and / or support the development of information and signposting for school staff so they are aware of where to seek support if they need it, then use this

position! Doing so will help to promote an overall environment where staff feel able to seek help for unhealthy eating habits, if and when they need it.


As part of this work you could share this resource with colleagues, in recognition of the challenges school staff can face in finding time to eat properly and healthily across the day:

Top tips for healthy eating at school:

- Eat meals at regular times. ✓
- Drink plenty of water. ✓
- Be mindful of portion sizes. ✓
- Give yourself encouragement. ✓
- Distract yourself when experiencing cravings. ✓
- Exercise instead of eating when you are bored. ✓
- Keep track of your eating habits. ✓
- Make conscious food choices. ✓
- Plan meals and snacks ahead of time. ✓
- Allow yourself a range of foods without forbidding particular foods. ✓
- Be gentle with yourself! Try not to beat yourself up if you lapse. ✓
- Only eat in certain settings (i.e the kitchen or staff room table). ✓
- Be attentive when you eat - try to stop working when you're eating. ✓
- Look for a support person / colleagues to help you stay motivated. ✓

Seeking help - specific sources of support for eating issues


You could use this **signposting template** to create a specific tool for your school to include some or all of the support options below and the suggested resource / information above as well:

 **BEAT** - advice and support line for people who have concerns about their eating / eating disorders. Also provide support for people who have loved ones experiencing problems. Phone: 0808 8010711

 **British Nutrition Foundation** - advice and support on healthy eating.

 **NHS advice on Binge Eating Disorder.**

 **Overeaters Anonymous GB** - support and information for people who overeat.

 Rethink Mental Illness information about **eating disorders.**