

Good Housekeeping

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Hey you!

Happy? Sad? Lonely?

Stay away from the Fridge!

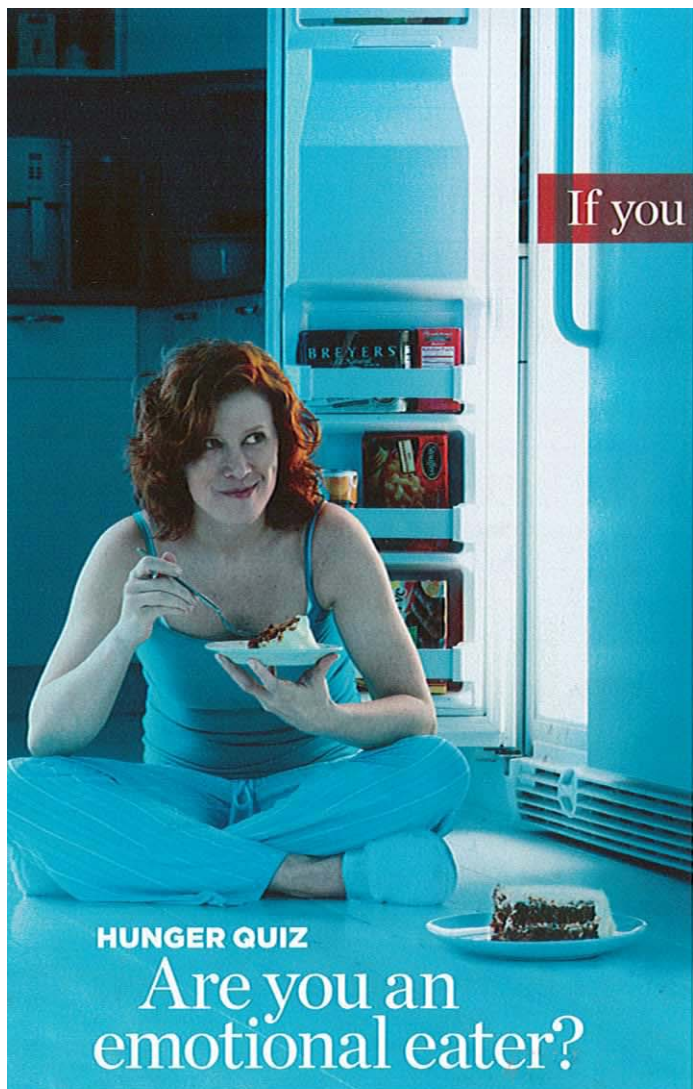
Instead, help yourself to 12 strategies proven to beat emotional eating—and lose big **By Hallie Levine Sklar**

When Lisa Downs, 43, is in a good mood, she sits in front of the TV and munches on Lay's Potato Chips. When she's stressed at work, she gets relief from black jelly beans and Twizzlers, and when she's bored, she turns to Snickers bars or Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. So this past fall, when her husband was temporarily out of work, it was no surprise that she found comfort in food. "I would sit in my office thinking, How are we going to pay all our bills? while shoving cookies into my mouth," says Downs, an office manager in Greentown, IN. "Within four months, I had gained 35 pounds."

Downs—like many other women—was wrestling with a powerful opponent: emotional eating. An Internet survey of 17,000 failed dieters (almost 90 percent of whom were women) found that virtually all of them had relapsed because of emotional issues. These stats don't surprise Roger Gould, M.D., a UCLA psychiatrist who conducted the survey: "I often see clients who are committed to losing weight, but as soon as they get into a fight with their husband or

have a bad day at work, they'll plow through a whole box of donuts. From a very young age, we're taught to use food as a psychological coping mechanism—it's a reward if we've done well, or a comfort if we've had a tough day."

Women are particularly susceptible because they're conditioned from childhood to suppress certain feelings, say experts. "Girls are often taught that it's bad to be sad, upset, or angry, so instead of vocalizing their emotions, they use food as a form of self-soothing," explains Judith Matz, coauthor of *The Diet Survivor's Handbook: 60 Lessons in Eating, Acceptance and Self-Care*. Another problem: When women need comfort, they don't turn to healthy bites. Research shows that the top foods overeaten by females are ice cream, chocolate, and cookies. "These sweets temporarily raise your level of serotonin [a feel-good hormone] and lower the level of cortisol [a stress hormone]," explains Pamela Peeke, M.D., a professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and author of *Body for Life for Women*.



If you stay up late, there's a good chance

HUNGER QUIZ

Are you an emotional eater?

To find out, review your eating habits from the last 24 hours, suggests Roger Gould, M.D., author of *Shrink Yourself: Break Free From Emotional Eating Forever!* Then ask yourself these questions:

1 Did your hunger come on quickly or gradually?

"Physical hunger develops slowly—first as a tummy rumble, then as hunger pains. Emotional hunger has a sudden, dramatic onset, usually triggered by an event or a feeling," explains Dr. Gould.

2 When you became hungry, did you have an almost uncontrollable need to eat right away?

3 While eating, did you pay attention to what went into your mouth? "If you're physically hungry, you stop when you're satisfied. With emotional hunger, you want more food—even after you're stuffed," says Dr. Gould.

4 Did you eat really fast? "When you try to fulfill emotional hunger, you pile food in," he explains.

5 Would anything have satisfied your hunger, or did you crave something specific? "If you're emotionally hungry," says Dr. Gould, "you often want candy, chips, and other junk food."

6 After you ate, did you feel guilty? If so, it was probably emotional eating. (When you fill up for strength and energy, you rarely feel remorseful.)

If you answered yes to three or more of these questions, chances are, you're an emotional eater.

How to break the cycle? First you have to pinpoint which feelings trigger overeating. To figure this out, create an "emotional eating record," suggests Edward Abramson, Ph.D., author of *Body Intelligence*. Take a three-by-five index card and write down four headings: TIME; LOCATION; FOOD; EMOTION OR THOUGHT. Put the card in your pocket so you can keep track of any unplanned snacks. After a few days, you'll be able to decipher which emotions and situations triggered eating binges.

"Most people fall into more than one category of emotional eating, indulging when they're happy as well as when they're stressed or depressed," says Abramson. Although you'd assume that most overeating is prompted by negative emotions, the reverse seems to be true. Brian Wansink, Ph.D., author of *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think*, surveyed more than 1,000 people and found that participants were most likely to turn to comfort foods when they were happy (86 percent) or when they wanted to reward themselves (74 percent), rather than when they were depressed (39 percent), bored (52 percent), or lonely (39 percent).

Here, four common emotions that drive women to overeat—and the strategies that can help you resist.

If you eat when you're happy

● **Be creative** The next time something fabulous happens—you get promoted, or your daughter makes the soccer team—invent a new kind of feel-good ritual. Instead of treating yourself to a special dinner with your husband, take an afternoon off and spend it with him. To recognize your daughter's accomplishment, join her in an activity like skating or biking. Begin to retrain your brain to celebrate without food.

● **Plan ahead** Developing a popcorn strategy, for example, could save you from eating an entire bag at the movies. "If you tell your husband beforehand, 'OK, I'm only going to have two handfuls,' you may actually limit yourself to that much," explains Abramson.

● **Learn how to party** If there are hors d'oeuvres, choose two of your favorites (and yes, one should be a veggie). Then eat just those items. Research shows that people who rely on a few diet staples are more likely to keep weight off than those who vary their foods. To prevent mindless grazing, stay more than an arm's length away from any snack bowls. And if you get a good conversation going, put your plate down. "The more you focus on people, the more distracted you get, and the more you tend to eat," explains Wansink.

you'll get a case of the munchies—and that can spell extra pounds

If you eat when you're anxious

● **Take a quick walk** A California State University study that tracked frequent snackers found that those who went for a brisk five-minute walk when they felt frazzled were much less likely to grab a candy bar than those who just sat at their desks. "Walking for only a few minutes lifts serotonin levels—and that boosts your mood and leaves you feeling less anxious," explains Robert Thayer, Ph.D., author of *Calm Energy*. This trick worked for Lisa Downs: "When I felt nervous about our family's finances, I would take a walk. Even five minutes helped curb my sweet cravings," she says.

● **Say "om"** De-stressing can be a powerful way to whittle down. A recent study from Oregon Health & Science University found that overweight women who performed daily relaxation techniques, such as meditation, yoga, or even writing in a diary for 20 minutes, lost an average of 10 pounds after 18 months—without consciously dieting. "We suspect that these relaxation techniques helped serve as a buffer to stress, so the women were less likely to overeat," explains study author Anne Nedrow, M.D.

● **Check your watch** The likeliest binge time for anxious eaters is late afternoon or early evening, because that's when stress levels are usually at their highest, says Cynthia Bulik, Ph.D., director of the Eating Disorders Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and author of *Runaway Eating*. So steer clear of the kitchen (or vending machine) during those hours.

If you eat when you're bored

● **Work for your food** If you're munching just because you have nothing better to do, choose a snack that requires time and energy, such as microwave popcorn, unshelled nuts—even crunchy foods like carrots that involve a lot of chewing. "For me, it's pistachios," confesses Madelyn Fernstrom, Ph.D., director of the Weight Management Center at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. "I have to crack the shells open one by one, which forces me to eat slowly and be more conscious of how much I'm putting in my mouth."

● **Skip Leno or Letterman** If you stay up late, there's a good chance you'll get a case of the munchies—and that can spell extra pounds. A 2004 University of Texas study found that nocturnal noshers end up eating more fat and calories than those who snack earlier in the day. "It's very easy to overeat if you're bored, especially if you're doing something sedentary like sitting in front of the TV," explains Abramson. A better move: Get in

bed an hour earlier and catch up on your zzz's; several studies show a clear link between obesity and too little sleep (say, less than seven hours).

If you eat when you're sad

● **Get a daily dose of vitamins and sun** It can help cheer you up, report researchers at the University of Washington School of Nursing. They asked 112 women who were mildly to moderately depressed to walk briskly outside for 20 minutes five days a week and take a daily dose of vitamins (50 mg of vitamins B1, B2, and B6; 400 mcg of folic acid; 400 IU of vitamin D; and 200 mcg of selenium). The women also upped their exposure to bright light, both natural and artificial, during the day. After eight weeks, almost all the women reported feeling less depressed—and 25 percent had lost weight, even though they had not been asked to diet. "Many of the women were eating less at meals, snacking less, and they even mentioned that their cravings for carbs diminished," explains Marie-Annette Brown, Ph.D., coauthor of *When Your Body Gets the Blues*.

● **Watch what you watch** Wansink and his research team found that when people saw the 1970 tearjerker *Love Story*, they ate about 30 percent more buttered popcorn than when watching the uplifting 2002 flick *Sweet Home Alabama*. Don't want to give up sob stories? You can still watch them if you do a little pre-movie reading: When viewers looked at the popcorn's nutrition label before the film started, they cut their munching by about two-thirds.

● **Attend religious services** The more often you go, the less likely you are to be overweight. A study from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill found that pious women reported higher activity levels. "One theory is that churchgoers are more likely to believe that their body is a temple of God, so they need to take care of it—which means eating more healthfully and staying active," explains study author Karen Hye-cheon Kim, Ph.D., a professor at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences.

● **Join an online support group** "If you're eating as a substitute for companionship, log on to the Internet instead," suggests Abramson. To find friends—and shed pounds—try joining a Web-based weight-loss program that includes expert counseling and access to chat rooms and message boards. Researchers from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Brown University found that people who followed these types of diet programs lost an average of 13 to 15 pounds in six months. ■