

# **WEEK SEVEN**

**Coping with Cravings**

**Defining and Dealing with "Binges"**

**Alternatives to Eating Can Aid Weight Control**

## Coping with Cravings

A food craving is the intense desire for a specific food, usually one that has a unique flavor or texture or both. Typically the desired food is a "problem food," one you have had trouble controlling in the past. Is your food desire related to physical hunger? If so, eating a nutritious meal or snack will satisfy the desire. Cravings, though, aren't solved so easily.

The following strategies can help you navigate your way through the rough seas of a craving.

1. "Just say **NO!**" You can make yourself physically hungry and increase your desire for a food by concentrating on it. Try firmly saying or thinking the word "**NO!**" any time you find your mind wandering back to the desired food. This may be all you need to interrupt these thoughts and prevent them from becoming a slip.
2. Distracting yourself may help you forget about cravings. Become immersed in an activity that requires concentration on something other than food, such as reading or crafts.
3. Exercise is beneficial in numerous ways, but it can be especially valuable as a way to break out of a craving spell. Even a walk around the block or a few trips up and down the stairs can help clear your head of thoughts about the desired food.
4. Get help! Friends and family members can support your weight management efforts. To get help with cravings, plan ahead by making a deal with someone close to you (preferably someone who knows and/or shares your difficulties with cravings). Discuss how you can help each other. That is, what do you need to hear when you are feeling vulnerable to the powers of a craving?
5. Help yourself! You should have a back-up plan in case you can't reach your crave-management partner. Remind yourself that you, not the craving, have control over your behavior. Identifying self-defeating thoughts and replacing them with positive self-talk can help boost your confidence in the face of a craving. The goal here is not to prevent cravings from occurring but to prevent the feelings of panic, powerlessness, and loss of control that sometimes accompany them.
6. Wait it out! You may feel like the craving will haunt you for eternity, but reminding yourself that it won't last can give you the strength to resist it. Use human weakness to gain strength: Put off making a decision (about whether to eat). Set a timer for 10 or 20 minutes and engage in one or more of the above strategies. If you make it through this period, you have put some distance between you and the craving. You have successfully interrupted the crave-indulge habit.
7. Does your craving still exist? Then spend a few moments brainstorming to identify lower-calorie, lower-fat alternatives that might be satisfying substitutes for the desired food (e.g. pretzels instead of potato chips, graham crackers instead of cookies).
8. Only the real thing will do, you say? Then allow yourself a controlled portion of the food, eat it in your designated eating place, record it in your Eating Diary, and return immediately to your regular meal plan. Depriving yourself of certain favorite foods probably contributed to the craving to begin with. Remember, the key is moderation!
9. Sometimes cravings are triggered by an emotional state, such as feeling down or anxious. While giving in to the craving might seem to provide some immediate relief from the negative feeling, this

escape is likely to be temporary. Dealing more directly with the emotional upset and its sources is more adaptive and lower in calories.

## Defining and Dealing with "Binges"

People of all weights sometimes report they "went on a binge," usually meaning that they ate more than is typical for them.

Getting our terms straight is important because a certain pattern of overeating requires special help from professionals with expertise in treating eating disorders. The clinical term for this pattern is "binge eating," which involves frequent periods of overeating to the point of significant discomfort or nausea and is accompanied by feelings of loss of control, guilt, and/or depression.

If you have concerns that your eating habits might fit this binge pattern, you should discuss this with your group leader for further evaluation. Most likely, your "binges" are not true binges, but are periods of simple overeating. If in doubt, ask. The following strategies can be helpful in controlling this common but caloric tendency.

1. Before you can devise a plan to interrupt a pattern of overeating, you must identify your triggers to overeating. Begin by keeping records and asking yourself these questions:
  - a. Am I more likely to overeat when alone or with others? Are there certain people with whom I tend to overeat ("eating buddies")?
  - b. Do I overeat during certain times of the day or during certain activities (e.g., in the evening watching TV, at social events)?
  - c. Do I overeat in response to certain feelings or moods (e.g., depression, guilt, anxiety)?
  - d. Do I overeat in response to stressful events (either single events or the accumulation of daily hassles)?
2. Never skip meals or go too long between meals or snacks. Strong physical hunger is a setup for overeating because you are more likely to take larger portions and eat more rapidly when you finally sit down to your next meal (you might not even make it to the table before beginning to inhale the food!).
3. Never deprive yourself of certain favorite foods. This all-or-none approach is a setup for overeating once your resolve inevitably weakens. As you are polishing off that last donut, you may set the stage to repeat the cycle by again making doomed promises to never eat another donut.
4. Never eat directly from a large container (e.g., full-sized bag of chips or cookies) or order more than one serving of an item. Eating individual portions at a time will not prevent you from having seconds or thirds, but it will force you to make a conscious decision about whether to have more.

5. Ask family members to avoid buying or bringing home foods which you are prone to binge on.

## **Alternatives to Eating Can Aid Weight Control**

Today let's consider food substitutes. Not fake fats or pseudo-sugars, but alternatives to eating.

For most people, some eating may contribute to emotional sustenance in ways that have little to do with the body's nutritional demands. Eating can be a way of celebrating an important event, socializing with friends or loved ones, or rewarding yourself after a hard day, week, or month.

Most weight managers also are aware of certain moods that trigger a desire to eat. It may be nervousness, depression, anger, frustration, boredom, or happiness. Saying "no" to food in the face of these powerful signals for eating may sometimes feel like throwing out the aspirin when you have a headache.

Don't forget, too, that tasty food is a source of immediate, dependable pleasure. Given all that we get out of eating, the age-old recommendations "eat less" and "don't snack" may seem like telling a poor person to "make more money." Giving up all the goodies we get from eating, with nothing to replace them, can be a recipe for diet fatigue. The growing sense of deprivation that goes with a restrictive diet can lead sooner or later (usually sooner) to chucking the whole enterprise.

Weight management needn't be all sackcloth and ashes, however. If you realize you're limiting a major source of reward, you can plan to replace it with other rewarding activities. Besides avoiding an "enjoyment deficit," you can plan to do other things to deal with moods that now trigger eating.

Let's not forget that some urges to eat sometimes seem to spring up out of nowhere. Years of clinical and personal experience attest to the fact that these urges will usually disappear in anywhere from 5-30 minutes if you don't spend the whole time looking at the forbidden object of your desire. Reminding yourself that the urge will pass can help a lot. Doing something else will help more.

All this may be great advice, but when you most need an alternative to eating, you'll probably be at your least creative. As with other aspects of weight control, you need to plan ahead.

Make a list of things you can do when your problem mood hits. Focus on things that might make things better, rather than just things that will let you tough it out. Include things you can do on a moment's notice. Get what you'll need and keep it on hand (e.g., books of short stories, records/discs, bath oil, paint and sandpaper for that furniture refinishing project, etc.).

Also list some activities that may require advance preparation or an ongoing commitment. If interested in continuing education courses, make a note of institutions that offer them, and the phone numbers. Call them the next working day.

