

How Does Stress Affect Your Eating Habits?

Objective

To identify how stress affects your eating habits and explore alternative ways to cope with stress.

You Should Know

Stress is a part of everyone's life, and daily stressors like being stuck in traffic or arguing with a family member are experienced by most people, most days. You might wake up with a splitting headache when you have a full day of work ahead. Occasionally you might also experience more significant stressors, such as losing a job, getting a divorce, or moving to a new city.

Different people have different ways of dealing with stress. Positive ways of dealing with stress include getting regular exercise, receiving support from a friend, listening to relaxing music, and so on. Negative ways of dealing with stress, which actually cause even more stress, include relying on alcohol and drugs, compulsive shopping, and overeating as a way to experience comfort.

It is easy to turn to food as a way to deal with stress because so called "comfort foods" are relatively inexpensive and almost always readily available. High-calorie foods, full of carbohydrates, sugar, and salt, also work very well at giving you an immediate sense of satisfaction, although this lasts for only a short time. Most people who overeat report having a sense of guilt and shame soon after they are done eating, and that emotional stress can trigger another round of unhealthy eating.

This worksheet is designed to help you identify stressful situations, explore the causes, and determine how stressful situations affect your food choices and eating.

What to Do

For one week, notice each time you are feeling stressed and identify what has caused these feelings. On the following chart, write down how your eating is affected, and what you do to cope with the stress other than choosing to overeat unhealthy foods. Then, rate how successful you were in choosing healthier ways to cope with stress, where 1 = Not very successful, 5 = Moderately Successful, to 10 = Very successful.

Reflections on This Exercise

What are the top three eating-related ways you cope with stress?

Can you identify healthy and effective ways to cope with stress?

How do the people around you influence the way you cope with stress?

Can you think of other ways you can change your relationship between stress and unhealthy eating?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
