

Managing the emotions behind eating

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How many times have you, after a particularly hard day, reached for some chocolate or ice cream? It's common for many people, but for those trying to lose weight, it can be detrimental to their long term success, and most weight-loss programs never even address it.

They focus on choosing healthier foods and exercising more, but they never answer a key question: how can people who have eaten to cope with emotions change their [eating habits](#), when they haven't learned other ways of coping with emotions?

Researchers at Temple's Center for Obesity Research are trying to figure out the answer as part of a new, NIH-funded weight loss study. The new treatment incorporates skills that directly address the [emotional](#) eating, and essentially adds those skills to a state-of-the art behavioral weight loss treatment.

"The problem that we're trying to address is that the success rates for long-term weight loss are not as good as we would like them to be," said Edie Goldbacher, a postdoctoral fellow at CORE. "Emotional eating may be one reason why people don't do as well in behavioral [weight loss](#) groups, because these groups don't address [emotional eating](#) or any of its contributing factors."

The study has already had one wave of participants come through, and many participants have seen some success in the short term, but have also learned the skills to help them achieve long term success.

Janet Williams, part of that first cohort, said she lost about 17 pounds over 22 weeks, and still uses some of the techniques she learned in the study to help maintain her weight, which has not fluctuated.

"The program doesn't just help you identify when you eat," said Williams. "It helps you recognize triggers that make you eat, to help you break that cycle of reaching for food every time you feel bored, or frustrated, or sad."

Williams said that the program teaches various techniques to help break that cycle, such as the "conveyor belt," in which participants, when overcome with a specific emotion, can recognize it and take a step back, before reaching for chips or cookies, and put those feelings on their mental "conveyor belt" and watch them go away.

"I still use the skills I learned in the study," she said. "I've learned to say, 'I will not allow this emotional episode to control my eating habits.'"

Provided by Temple University

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