

Are you lonesome tonight? Why we, like Elvis, turn to food for comfort

August 16 2017, by Melissa Wdowik



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

August 16 is known to many Elvis Presley fans as the anniversary of his untimely death at the age of 42 in 1977. It is also the perfect occasion, for many, to honor him by indulging in his favorite foods, including fried banana and peanut butter sandwiches (with or without bacon), fried biscuits, bacon-wrapped meatballs, chicken fried steak, [jelly doughnuts](#)

[and vegetables saturated with butter and salt.](#)

While it may be OK to indulge in these foods occasionally, it is not healthy to make a regular diet of them.

What was it about these foods that appealed to Elvis? He could have afforded spa cuisine and high-end restaurants, but he maintained his love of southern-style comfort [food](#), always in large portions, even when his weight crept up and his health went down.

As a food researcher and registered dietitian for more than 20 years, I have studied some of the reasons we turn to comfort food – and also how eating to feed our emotions can sometimes get out of hand.

Reason number one: We like it

There are many theories as to why we choose food we know is not good for us, not least of which is that it tastes good.

Other ideas range from [social norms](#), environment and memories to emotions, genetics and the microbiome; the nature versus nurture debate is alive and well for [eating habits](#).

Social norms, or [acceptable rules of behavior](#), affect both [food choice](#) and amounts eaten. If we are surrounded by others who eat, prepare and condone [unhealthy foods](#), we are more likely to consume them.

Similarly, our environment influences our dietary choices, for better or for worse. Growing up poor in what are now known as [food deserts](#) may preclude the intake of fresh fruits and vegetables. Additionally, food preparation methods are influenced by culturally acceptable traditions, such as cooking greens with pork fat, as is common in the South.

Presley was raised in a poor household, where it is rumored that dinners sometimes included [squirrel meat](#), but his mother was an excellent cook. He spoke fondly of her specialties, such as [fried chicken, mashed potatoes, corn bread and gravy](#). These foods probably later reminded him of both his family and simpler times. It is easy to see the appeal of eating foods from our childhood; reminiscences of family outings, holidays and sporting events often lead to conversations of the foods that were eaten there. Even the smell of those foods can bring back happy memories. There is something to be said for food that is good for our soul.

Presley's long-time cook, Mary Jenkins Langston, reported that [Elvis said the only thing in life he got any enjoyment out of was eating](#). She obliged with the down-home cooking he loved, and he is said to have gone to extremes to satisfy additional cravings, such as his cross-country flight to a [Denver restaurant](#).

More than one in three turn to food for comfort

Elvis was not alone in finding comfort in food. Thirty-eight percent of adults report [overeating or eating unhealthy foods due to stress](#), with almost half doing so at least weekly. This behavior serves as a distraction or even a way to numb feelings of sadness or depression. Emotional eating, as this is called, may arise from an inability to manage emotions in other ways. It is self-perpetuating, as the [eating behavior](#) in turn [increases cravings and intake](#) .

As a dietitian and nutrition educator, I am the first to declare there are no bad foods, only bad amounts. When choosing to comfort ourselves with, well, comfort food, I recommend trying a small portion and eating it slowly; we will likely enjoy it just as much as a large portion if we are truly mindful about enjoying it. Follow this with distracting ourselves with a walk or other activity, and we can avoid the neurological and

hormonal adaptations that encourage a continuation of [emotional eating](#). Short of saying that food is addictive, I would say that research has shown that some individuals are more susceptible than others to the habit-forming behavior of [overeating high-fat, high-sugar foods](#).

Those neurological and hormonal adaptations are also [influenced by genes](#). [Leptin and ghrelin](#) are digestive neuroendocrine hormones known to regulate hunger and fullness. Current research focusing on their genetic variants and determinants will help us understand eating behavior, but most nutrition experts agree that genetic susceptibility can be overpowered by intentional healthy eating efforts.

The role of nature can be explored further in examining the microbiome, which refers to the bacteria, good and bad, found in the gut. Research suggests [lower diversity in gut microbiome](#) is associated with more unhealthy eating behavior, and there is evidence that gut bacteria affect how we respond to hormones that make us feel hungry or full.

What causes a low diversity of gut bacteria? A diet high in fat and processed foods and a low intake of fiber, fruits and vegetables. Increased good bacteria can be achieved with more fresh fruits and vegetables, legumes, fermented foods and probiotic sources such as yogurt and kefir.

Were Elvis' eating habits due to nature or nurture? We will never know. Also, we will never know the extent of his loneliness and whether his sense of isolation was fed, in part, by his fame. Yet I think we can all agree that it is heartbreaking to think that a man who brought so much joy to so many people relied heavily on food for comfort.

While the foods of our youth retain a hold on all of us, and biology influences our genes and gut, a combination of factors was likely at play in Elvis' yearning for food. The lesson learned may be for each of us to

figure out a way to balance these influences, and to do what's best for both our body and soul.

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