

Why Do We Overeat?

Why is it so hard to stop eating, even when we are not hungry? Studies show that sugar is the prime driver for animals to work for food. But when fat and sugar are combined, there is greater brain activation, thus increasing that drive for the food.

But here is the catch (and the way out). Stick with me, here.

Before we take the first bite of a food, we are anticipating the taste of it. We can look at the fudgy brownie and not feel a genuine hunger, but still want to eat it. Fat and sugar together create a dopamine spike in our bodies. Dopamine is a transmitter in our bodies that creates pleasurable feelings. Yes, you knew there was good reason for that chocolate addiction. Sugar, fat, and salt are very strong stimuli. The most desired foods have at least two of them. So we get on a cycle of seeing food-anticipating the flavor-eating and enjoying it-dopamine release. Often the dopamine stays elevated, and the food becomes harder to resist next time. Hence, we reinforce the “addiction” by continuing the cycle.

In fact, some people are more predisposed to being vulnerable to this cycle. Here are the three characteristics that describe those individuals:

1. Do you **lose control** in the face of highly palatable (read: yummy) foods?
2. Do you experience a **lack of feeling full** when you are eating?
3. Do you **think about food** even when you are not eating (preoccupation)?

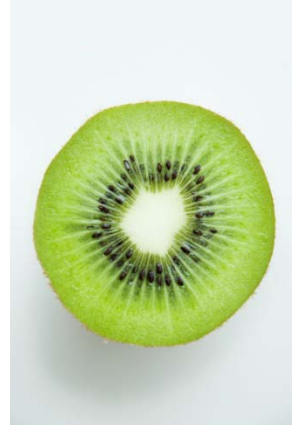
It turns out that 50% of obese, 30% of overweight, and 20% of healthy-weight individuals score very high on those three characteristics. This is not a disease. It is a syndrome that Dr. David A. Kessler calls “hypereating”. The reward circuits in these brains are in overdrive. Every time a “hypereater” consumes one of these high fat/sugar/salt foods, the brain circuits are strengthened, making it harder to resist next time.



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The good news is that we can change this circuitry. Here are some ways to rehab our overeating, according to Dr. Kessler:

1. Decide **before** a stressful or busy situation what you will eat.
2. Figure out how much food you need, put it on your plate, and don't go back for seconds.
3. Find foods that will satisfy you, rather than stimulate your appetite. Try foods from nature and non-processed foods.
4. Rehearse your actions like a trained athlete. Decide to walk past the donuts before-hand.
5. Stay tuned-in to emotional stressors that may trigger the automatic behavior.
6. Stop the thought. Turn off the image of the trigger food before you debate with yourself about whether to eat it.
7. Think of the unhealthy food along with several unappealing images. Create a "reverse advertisement" for the food in your brain.



Bottom Line: Resist the urge to indulge, and next time it will be easier.

Remember, our goal should be to eat food for satisfaction, not stimulation. We do not want food to take us on a roller coaster ride, but to nourish and sustain us.

For more information on this topic, read *The End of Overeating*, by Dr. David A. Kessler.

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