

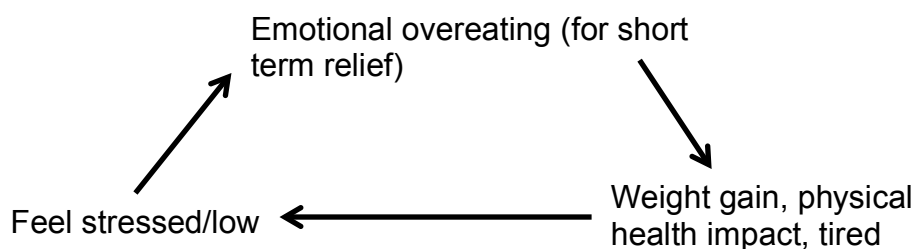
Emotional Eating in Lockdown

Without our usual routines and with empty shelves at the supermarket, not to mention anxiety and mood changes, the way we're eating is changing. This guide focuses on emotional over and under-eating, as well as binge eating and overcoming that initial lack of motivation to cook meals at home.

Emotional Over-Eating

Food is one of our fundamental needs, and so we are programmed to feel soothed and rewarded when we eat food, in order that we continue to prioritise eating. This is why when we are stressed we often turn to eating. Eating also replaces the extra energy we use when we are stressed, helps us to stay more awake and energetic when our sleep is suffering, and provides a distraction from other things going on. So, in the short term eating more to reduce stress might well work!

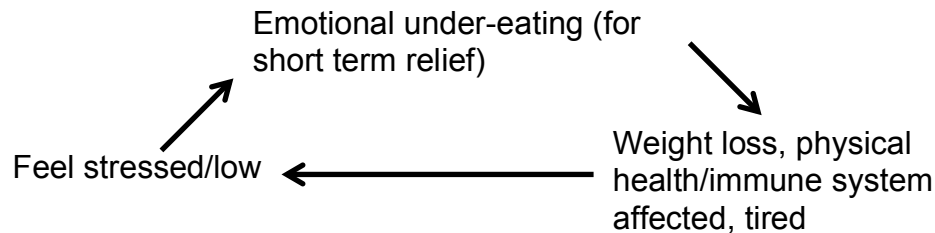
However, in the long-term it can result in weight-gain, increased blood pressure, generally poorer physical health, and increased lethargy as we have to rest to digest efficiently, and our blood sugar levels become dysregulated. These things often only add to our stress, so even though eating is effective at soothing us in the short term, in the long term we end up stuck in this cycle:



Emotional Under-Eating

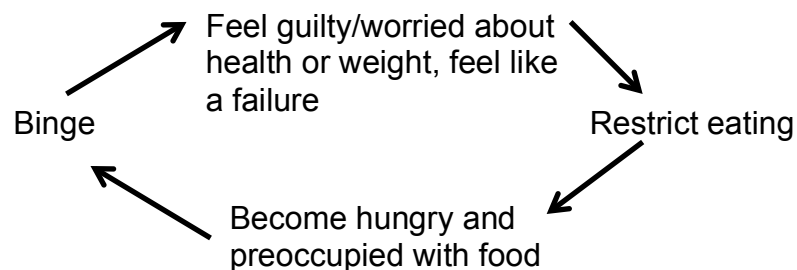
For others, when we are very stressed we go into 'fight or flight' mode (our guide on *'Managing Anxiety during the Coronavirus Pandemic'* explains this more), where our body is preparing to run away from or fight off danger. This means that our digestive system is not a priority, so we can lose our appetite. Restricting eating can also help us to save up food, which can feel reassuring to those concerned about stock issues or getting sick and not being able to do the shopping, or it can provide a sense of control when other things feel out of control. Also, when we are anxious about contamination in particular, we might become more anxious about food and eating.

But just like over-eating, while this can make us feel a bit better in the short-term, in the long-term it can be extremely problematic. We might lose weight, have less energy, and without a regular balanced diet our immune system becomes compromised also, which is a particular concern at the moment.



Binge-Eating

Binge-eating refers to a pattern of switching between eating lots of food in one go, and then restricting eating afterwards. People often start with the 'binge' and then feel guilty, so skip meals or restrict calories the next day. This results in becoming very hungry and low in energy and craving food, which often leads to another 'binge', and starts the cycle (see below). However this cycle can also begin with a period of restricted eating, after which people become so hungry and low in energy that when they next eat they eat a much larger quantity than usual, and might make choices about what they eat based on emotion rather than what would be a healthy balanced meal.



So what do I do?

1. Have a plan, and stick to it

The key to breaking all of these patterns is to keep a consistent meal plan. You should aim to eat breakfast, a morning snack, lunch, an afternoon snack and dinner, and to have these meals at a similar time each day.

You don't have to plan out exactly what you will eat for each meal, but it can help to at least have a range of options that you have thought of in advance, and to decide what you are having in advance of the next mealtime. To decide what these meals should look like try not to count calories, but instead

remember back to a time when you felt pretty good, and were eating quite well, and base your meal plan on what sort and size of meals you were having then.

If a meal or snack turns into a **binge**, or if you end up having **larger portions** than you normally would, or eating a desert after every meal, you should **STILL** eat the next meal or snack as planned. This stops the periods of hunger and preoccupation with eating, and will in turn reduce the frequency of the binge episodes. Eating when you are full can sometimes be unpleasant, but sticking to your meal plan despite this will help your brain learn that eating lots in one go is not a good thing.

Keeping a meal plan and having snacks between meals is important to those **restricting their eating** also. Having a plan and ensuring that the things in it are healthy, and will provide us with the vitamins we need for a good immune system, can help to increase feelings of control and reduce anxiety about getting ill which might be fueling the restrictive eating. It will also give us the energy that we need to exist in a slightly higher state of stress than usual (we burn more calories when stressed), and will mean that our body is in a better state to fight of illnesses is we do catch something.

2. Keep a record

It can help to keep a record of what you are eating, not only because this adds a level of accountability for what you eat (knowing you will have to write it down afterwards), but also because it can help you to identify triggers for emotional eating. At the end of this guide is a table you can use. Here is an example of how it might be filled in (the * column is to be ticked if you feel distressed by what you ate/didn't eat).

Time	Food and drink consumed	Place	*	What happened before this
Monday Breakfast	Bran flakes, orange juice, coffee	Kitchen		Woke up hungry
Morning snack	9 shortbread biscuits, tea	Sofa	*	Feeling really stuck with a work issue. Couldn't get hold of boss on phone- frustrating. Read the news when I started snacking.
Lunch	Salad (lettuce, cherry tomatoes, dressing), water	Kitchen	*	Should have stuck to plan and eaten a full meal
Afternoon snack	Fruit salad	Kitchen		Was hungry, but made a healthy snack instead of eating biscuits
Dinner	Homemade curry with rice and naan bread, fruit squash 1x biscuit bar + tea	Kitchen		Wasn't hungry thanks to afternoon snack. Enjoyed meal much more tonight sat at table than last night in front of TV.

This person might use this record to decide that they should eat all of their meals and snacks in the kitchen, without distractions and should avoid eating to 'fill time' while they're feeling frustrated waiting for something. They also noticed the importance of getting back to the meal plan after going 'off-track'. It also looks they might benefit from reading the news and thinking about current affairs separately to snacking.

3. Find alternatives for self-soothing

Everyone does different things to help them feel soothed or calm or positive. It can be particularly effective if your alternative self-soothing activity is incompatible with eating (uses your hands so you can't eat, or gets you away from the house/kitchen).

Here are some ideas:

- Turn the music on loud and dance
- Call a family member
- Play a game of something on your phone or with a friend online
- Do some exercise such as yoga, a stroll, or some body-weight exercises
- Write a card or letter to someone you miss
- Make something
- Video call your best friend
- Do a mindfulness meditations (there are lots of links to free meditations on our signposting page)
- Have a warm bath
- Respond to messages from the day
- Watch an episode of your favourite TV series



You will need to use these:

1. When you feel the urge to binge or skip a meal, or are about to face one of the 'triggers' that you have identified from your record

Triggers could be things that happen or that you do (calls from a particular family member, reading the news, the children fighting, loud noise from the neighbours) or thoughts (thinking I've not been productive enough working from home today, thinking about the financial impact this will have, thinking I've not been exercising as much as I used to).

Alternative soothing activities help us to engage in these things without the need to eat during or immediately after.

2. After a binge or skipped meal

Once we start binge-eating, or following a binge or a skipped meal, we might feel guilty or feel bad about ourselves. This is a really important time to engage in an alternative self-soothing activity to try to keep the bingeing episode as short as possible, and to feel calm enough to remember the importance of sticking to your meal plan before the next meal or snack time.

3. At the end of a meal or snack

If we have a tendency to over-eat it can be hard to stop at the end of a meal or snack and there is often a temptation to go back for more. If we have a tendency to under-eat then when we have had a proper meal and snacks in between we can become preoccupied with worries that we ate too much. It is important to have an alternative soothing activity to follow up a meal with to help turn your attention back away from food.

4. Identify the emotions behind the emotional eating, and be kind to yourself!

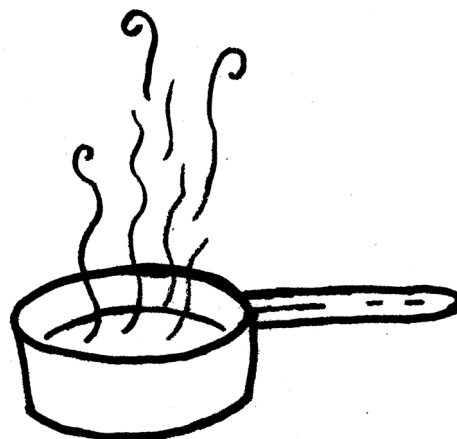
One of the main things that keeps us stuck in a cycle of over or under-eating is not wanting to confront the emotional experience underneath it. If we stop eating to soothe ourselves when things are hard, or restricting to feel better about things, we might have to feel difficult emotions more.

But difficult feelings are ok, and are part of human experience. They make us real, and they mean that we care about something. Rather than expecting yourself to feel ok all of the time, and so feeling like you have to get rid of those difficult feelings when they come up (by eating or restricting), try to just sit with and acknowledge those emotions:

- Name them when you notice them
- Tell others that they're there
- Give yourself a half hour or so in the day where you reflect on how you're feeling- you might keep a journal, meditate, write a poem, go for a 'thinking' stroll, or agree to spend 30 minutes having a conversation about this with a housemate or a friend on the phone.
- Practice self-compassion- we have a guide on '*Self-Compassion in Self-Isolation*' and another one on '*Taking a Compassion Break*', which is all about noticing, acknowledging, sharing and responding compassionately to difficult feelings.

5. Cook your own meals

Not only are home-cooked meals usually healthier than ready meals (which tend to have lots of preservatives in) and takeaways (which are often high in fats and sugars), but taking control of what you are eating, and taking time over the entire process of preparing and eating food can make a meal feel more satisfying when you do eat it, and can help you to feel better about what you are eating as you know what's in it.



But what if I don't even have the motivation to cook proper meals?

Most people are cooking more food for themselves at the moment than they usually would, and it makes sense that you will run out of motivation or interesting things to eat. Here are a few practical tips:

1. **Cook in large batches**

Save the leftover portions for another day or freeze them for later. This way you get healthy, home-cooked meals more often, without having to cook every day!

2. **Try new things!**

If you get bored of eating your staple recipes over and over, or if you've never really cooked before, check out these websites for simple ideas without loads of fancy ingredients you won't be able to find at the moment:

- <https://www.bbcgoodfood.com/feature/stay-home-get-cooking>
- <https://www.jamieoliver.com/recipes/category/books/keep-cooking-and-carry-on/>

3. **Keep it simple and keep it balanced**

There is nothing wrong with eating meals that only have a few ingredients, or using pre-made sauces or canned foods. Go easy on yourself! Here are some ideas for meals with very few ingredients but that get you a balance of carbs, veg, and protein (nb: meat can be swapped for lentils, pulses or beans in all of these!):

- **Veggie pasta:** Boil pasta for time recommended on packet. Fry or microwave vegetables of your choice. Drain pasta and add cooked vegetables, as well as a can of chickpeas and pasta sauce (from a jar).
- **Home-made curry:** Boil rice. Fry up chicken, onion and peppers. Add curry sauce (from jar) and spinach to frying pan. Drain rice and serve curry on top of rice.
- **Veggie Tagine:** Fry or microwave peppers, aubergine and onion. Put in a pan with chopped tomatoes and some curry powder/curry spices. Make couscous (add boiling water from kettle) and serve sauce on top of/mixed into couscous.
- **Fajitas:** fry onion, chicken, and peppers in oil and fajita seasoning (from packet). Serve inside warmed up tortilla/flour wraps. (If you want you can add salsa, sour cream and/or guacamole, which you can make by mashing an avocado with lemon juice, and chilli flakes or garlic if you have them!)
- **Peanut noodles:** Cook noodles and lentils in water. Add a vegetable stock cube, splash of sweet chilli sauce and dollop of peanut butter + spinach and/or peppers (fried or microwaved in advance).
- **Fish and chips:** Chop potatoes into wedges, drizzle with oil and salt and cooked in oven. Cook frozen breaded fish fillets in oven at the same time. Heat up some peas in boiling water on hob. Serve with tartare sauce or ketchup.

Food record (see page 3 for explanation and example):

Time	Food and drink consumed	Place	*	What happened before this