5 STEPS TO OVERCOMING FOOD ADDICTION

Do you believe you are addicted to food? The popular notion today is that anyone who can’t seem to stop once they start eating foods rich in sugar, fat and salt probably is addicted, and that’s the reason they overeat or binge eat.

We have a different opinion.

Our 40+ years of experience at Green Mountain tells us that you may have more power than you think when it comes to what and how much you eat. And it doesn’t necessarily involve giving up foods you love. In fact, the belief that you must is at the root of the problem for many people.

Feelings of food addiction often rear their head when we try to restrict what we eat in order to control our weight.

These five steps can help you explore what’s behind your feelings of food addiction. They can put you squarely on the path to eating what you want in a way that makes you feel great and supports your health and healthy weight.

**STEP 1:**
Stop Calling It An Addiction

**STEP 2:**
Explore Whether Emotional Overeating or Habit Is at the Root of Your Eating Behaviors

**STEP 3:**
Experiment with How You Eat

**STEP 4:**
Experiment with What You Eat

**STEP 5:**
Frontload Self-Care
Exploring Food Addiction

We hear the term “food addiction” quite a bit these days but the truth is, even scientists aren’t clear whether it’s accurate. Leading researchers prefer to use the term “food and addiction,” creating a separation that may be important for effective management of food cravings.

Addiction is characterized by a compulsion to seek and take a substance, loss of control in limiting how much is taken, and emergence of a negative emotional state when the substance is not available. In the case of food, it can look like this:

You crave a chocolate bar in the middle of the afternoon. You try your best to not eat it, but you eventually give in.

Your craving doesn’t subside, though you keep thinking about the chocolate, and go back for more.

You then feel upset about eating more, and may even eat more to help soothe that feeling.

You resolve not to eat chocolate again because you can’t seem to control yourself with it.

But you crave it again the next day. You can’t think of anything else, and obsess about it until you have it again.

It’s important to understand that food cravings are normal. They are considered part of the internal drive to eat that is important to survival. It’s the intensity with which people experience them that may differ, however. That intensity is often driven by feelings of deprivation that are created by weight-loss diet rules that forbid certain foods. Anyone who has been on a diet may be able to relate to the above scenario.

In today’s world, vast numbers of people have lived their lives restricting what they eat in an effort to lose weight or avoid weight gain. As a result, they often miss out on the pleasure derived from eating and the feeling of satisfaction after eating which is important to appetite regulation. They may also miss out on other important roles food plays in our lives, such as celebration or sociability. All of these factors can be a set-up for increasing the appeal of certain foods and subsequent overeating.

Additionally, the “restrict/binge cycle”—the overeating that regularly occurs following restrictive eating such as is seen with dieting—may trigger brain changes that affect how much we want and need of certain food ingredients to feel satisfied. Those brain changes may mean that some people are more vulnerable to the sight or smell of foods and may even require more of certain types of food to feel satisfied.

The addiction model suggests that ingredients like sugar are responsible for intense cravings yet research does not support the claim that sugar is addictive. Further, in the addiction model, abstinence is required. But that may exacerbate cravings as attempts at abstinence sit the root of the restrict-binge cycle. It’s like trying to solve a problem by doing what created it in the first place.

In our 40+ years working with women who struggle with food cravings, we have found that in moving away from the restrict-binge cycle by regularly eating balanced meals, better managing stress, and starting to think differently about their ability to manage their eating, many people find they are able to eat foods rich in sugar, fat and salt in a way that supports their well-being.

Our experience is reflected in the steps we provide in this white paper for overcoming feelings of food addiction.
STEP 1: STOP CALLING IT AN ADDICTION

How does the term “addiction” make you feel? Hopeless, out of control, weak-willed?

While you may truly feel and act like you have no control over how much you eat of certain foods, calling the struggle an addiction can create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

When we don’t believe we can do something about a problem, we usually can’t.

But when we talk to ourselves more positively, we create an environment of possibility. One that supports us in moving forward to discover the roots of problems so that we can develop effective strategies for solving them.

What term can you use that helps you think more positively about your ability to manage your eating? We’ll discuss some ways to talk about the overwhelming pull towards certain foods or ingredients that some of us experience. First, though, explore below how your thinking can create eating problems.

Tackle Your Thinking Errors

Thinking errors are ways of thinking that drive us to behave in ways that don’t take us where we want to go. When you find yourself thinking in the following ways, explore if this is at the root of your struggle with food, either causing or significantly contributing to it.

All-or-Nothing Thinking: The tendency to go to extremes, judging things—whether they be food or behaviors—as absolutely good or terribly bad. Example: After eating a piece of birthday cake, you believe you have blown your diet, so you might as well eat more.

The Challenge: Recognize that few things are truly black and white. Indeed, living in the gray offers much more flexibility in the choices we make and what we learn from them. Could a piece of birthday cake be a pleasurable once-in-a-while eating experience that, while it may have little nutritional value per se, satisfies you and allows you to stop thinking about the cake and enjoy the party?

Good Food/Bad Food: This is about labeling certain foods as the foods we “should” eat. Other foods are off-limits. The trouble is, forbidden fruit tastes the sweetest. When we tell ourselves we can’t have something, we end up thinking about it more. Then, when we give in and eat it—as most of us inevitably do—we rarely eat it in moderation.

The Challenge: View foods neutrally. What you want to know is how a food makes you feel; it’s hard to know that when you have preconceived notions. That is, if you think a food is bad, you may feel bad after eating it, purely as a result of what you thought about it.

Last-Chance Thinking. Results from deprivation, which is part of the diet mentality that has become ingrained in many of us after years of trying and failing to follow weight-loss diets. When we give in and eat a forbidden food, we think that “tomorrow, I’ll go back on the diet so I better eat as much as I can now.” Rather than stopping eating when we feel satisfied, we override that cue out of fear that we won’t have another chance to eat the foods we enjoy. We may actually do more harm to ourselves during the times we are planning to diet, than if we never planned to diet at all.

The Challenge: Tell yourself you can always have more if you decide you really want more. Take the time to savor what you eat, then pause to consider and decide, perhaps waiting 10 minutes or so, rather than automatically reaching for more.

“Should” Statements: “I should eat healthy.” “I shouldn’t eat that food.” When we “should” on ourselves, we compare ourselves to an ideal that often isn’t realistic for us. As a result, should statements make us feel like we don’t measure up. That can lead to emotional overeating in an attempt to make ourselves feel better.

The Challenge: Change “should” statements to “I want…” or “I don’t like….” “I want an apple” or “I don’t like apples so I don’t want one.” This makes your decision your choice, and that can have a big impact on your ability to actually follow through with it.
STEP 2: EXPLORE WHETHER OTHER ISSUES ARE AT THE ROOT OF YOUR EATING BEHAVIORS

Is It Emotional Overeating?
It’s normal to eat because we’re happy, sad, bored, or just because we like the taste of a food. But when food becomes our go-to to manage feelings, that’s emotional overeating.

Emotional overeating occurs for many reasons but one of the most common is dieting. Diets impose rules that aren’t always valid and rarely meet our individual needs. So most of us can’t stay on one. Then we can feel ashamed, guilty, and like we’ve failed.

It’s important to recognize that many people today say they’ve quit dieting but they still live according to diet rules.

So even though they say they’re not dieting, the same emotions arise when they fail to follow the rules. These feelings commonly result in overeating to cope.

For some people, however, emotional overeating has nothing to do with dieting. Instead, they have formed a habit of overeating to manage emotional difficulties. In that case, a therapist can help you uncover the reasons you overuse food to cope, and develop other ways to manage emotions.

The path to overcoming emotional overeating
→ Give up diet rules.
→ Start to feed yourself predictably and well.
→ Give yourself permission to eat what you want.

The book Eat What You Love, Love What You Eat for Binge Eating, co-authored by Green Mountain’s chief clinical director Dr. Kari Anderson, details a realistic approach to overcoming emotional overeating—one that can help you feel better in the moment while suggesting other ways to take care of yourself to reduce emotional overeating.

For all emotional overeaters, the path to overcoming the behavior starts with identifying it when it happens, discovering the purpose it serves, proactively managing emotional triggers so you are less likely to need food to cope, and experimenting with other methods of coping so food is not your primary go-to.

Remember—it’s perfectly normal to eat when emotional. The goal is to decrease the frequency, not make it disappear. If we want to eat for emotional reasons, then taking the time to explore why and whether eating will produce the desired result can help you make the decision whether you really want to eat or not. Sometimes you will decide yes, and that’s okay.

Eating mindfully and intuitively, without guilt, can help keep it to one episode of overeating, not a downward spiral into self-loathing that only leads to more overeating.

A word about binge eating disorder (BED):
Not everyone who emotionally overeats has an eating disorder, but everyone who binge eats has a background of emotionally overeating. The diagnostic criteria for BED includes the feeling of being out of control with food, which may feel like an addiction. Although many of the same approaches are used to interrupt binge eating and emotional overeating, BED is a serious eating disorder and needs specialized treatment. Use this screening tool to determine whether you may be struggling with BED.
**Do You Overeat Out of Habit?**

Habit is a recurrent, often unconscious pattern of behavior that develops through repetition. Sometimes we overeat certain foods just because that’s the way we’ve eaten them again and again. It’s often called mindless eating; popcorn at the movies is one example of mindless, habit-driven eating that often results in overeating.

Neurologically, repetitive behaviors produce pathways or grooves in our brains that lead to the development of habits. These grooves keep us tied to particular ways of behaving; it’s like we get stuck in a rut in the road and can’t easily get out.

The brain actually produces neurochemicals that draw us in the form of cravings.\(^3\)

This habituation can be so powerful, it causes us to do things that are not reasonable and can even be harmful.

The good news is that we can create new grooves by practicing different behaviors that are more supportive of our health and well-being, such as mindful, intuitive eating (see below).

It takes a little effort at first to engage in new behaviors, but as we practice the new behaviors, they take hold and the old grooves don’t dominate any more. They’re still there for us to fall back into occasionally, but with new habits established, we can get ourselves out of them more easily.

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**STEP 3: EXPERIMENT WITH HOW YOU EAT**

Experimenting means to try something different, observing the results without judgment in order to discover something unknown or test a principle. This is important because we are all different. Cookie-cutter approaches like weight-loss diets don’t work.

The following experiments explore how the diet mentality affects your eating. The diet mentality drives many beliefs about and behaviors around food that cause people to think they are addicted to food.

**Experiment #1: Eat three balanced meals a day, and, if you choose, a mid-morning, mid-afternoon, and evening snack as well.**

This explores the impact of chaotic eating—when a person skips meals or eats too lightly or unbalanced meals, only to get too hungry later. When we get too hungry, we tend to choose richer foods and eat them quickly, often passing the point at which we feel satisfied before we realize it. Then we end up feeling uncomfortably full.

Many people eat chaotically because they’re trying to lose weight. Others do it because they’re so busy, they don’t think of eating until they’re overly hungry. The solution here is to make eating a priority—it is a basic need for well-being.

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**Green Mountain at Fox Run’s Eating Philosophy**

*Mindful, intuitive eating* offers a natural way to begin creating new brain pathways for improved behaviors around food. This is the basis of the Green Mountain philosophy that has helped thousands of women end eating and weight struggles over the last four decades.

→ It’s about being present and aware of the reasons you want to eat and how you feel as you do it.
→ Is it physical hunger at play or do you just want to enjoy the taste of a particular food?

When you pay attention to notice when you are hungry and when your hunger goes away, or when the flavor of the food starts to fade, you’re practicing the habit of listening to your body’s signals that were designed to tell you when, what and how much to eat for well-being.
TRY THIS:

At a minimum, eat three balanced meals at regular mealtimes, say every 4-5 hours or so. If you aren’t hungry first thing in the morning, eat within a couple of hours of waking.

Then pay attention to other times when you feel hungry and eat a snack if you want.

Give yourself permission to eat snacks when you don’t feel hungry but notice if you don’t feel hungry. This is important because it helps you become aware of why you want to eat, and also gives you the power to choose. That helps prevent feelings of deprivation.

Experiment with eating a combination of protein foods, fruits and vegetables, and starchy foods at meals and snacks. You may notice how this provides the balance needed to support healthy appetite regulation.

Experiment #2: Give yourself permission to eat whatever you want.

Many people feel this experiment is way too dangerous to try. But think about it:

When you don’t let yourself eat that chocolate bar, even though you want it badly, do you keep thinking about it? And thinking about it? And thinking about it? Until you eat it? Then you don’t eat just one, but two, three, four or more?

Maybe you keep eating until it’s all gone, even though you feel ill because you just don’t know how to stop otherwise?

That’s the restrict/binge cycle in action. Overeating is a normal response to restricting. When we do it a lot, as we do when dieting, we end up overeating a lot. Repeated overeating can end up causing brain changes that may dull the feelings of pleasure we get from eating foods like candy bars. Which may lead us to eating more in order to get the desired effect.

The way to short-circuit the restrict/binge cycle is to stop restricting. Instead, experiment with letting yourself have the chocolate bar in the first place. If in doing that, you find you struggle with stopping, try these strategies to help you stop before you feel ill.

Be sure you are well-fed, as described in Experiment #1.

Buy just one candy bar, not a whole bag. Or a small bag of chips instead of a family size. Doing this builds in an automatic stopping point. Tell yourself you can always go back for more if you decide, but give yourself the chance to think whether you really want more or not.

Eat mindfully: Really slow down and taste the food. Try putting your eating utensil down between bites. Or if you aren’t using a utensil, put down the food between bites and don’t pick it up again until you swallow.

Eat with a friend so there’s someone there to talk you through feelings of wanting more. Or think about this: Imagine yourself as your own friend (what a concept!) and practice talking to yourself about this issue like you would talk to a friend.

Our Tips for Managing Food Cravings can help, too.

If you find yourself eating more than you really want, it’s key to not feel guilty, ashamed or like you’ve failed. Learn from it—why did you eat more than you wanted? What can you do next time that would help you not eat more than you want? Then let it be. Focus on the things in your life that are meaningful, instead of continuing to revisit the eating experience in your mind.

Permission to eat what you want is key to solving eating struggles for people who have dieted a lot. It requires practice so don’t throw in the towel too early. If you need help, reach out for support. A friend who has successfully stopped diet thinking and behaviors, or a nutritionist or therapist trained in the practice of mindful or intuitive eating, or even a stay at Green Mountain at Fox Run can help.
Experiment #3: Make and use a Green Mountain Cookie Jar.

This will help you practice the habit of turning to something other than food when you’re stressed, sad, bored or feeling some other challenging emotion.

On a piece of paper, jot down different activities that you really like to do, leaving enough space between them to cut them into individual strips, each with a single activity. Things like: relaxing in the hot tub, taking a walk with your best friend, talking with friends online, getting a manicure or massage. Activities that stimulate the senses are especially good because they have the ability to help us to regulate our energy and emotional states. An example might be the calming smell of lavender and stimulating scent of citrus.

Cut the activities into strips, then drop into a jar you choose as your “cookie jar”.

When you find yourself wanting a cookie (or other food) when you’re feeling emotional but aren’t hungry, or aren’t sure whether you’re really hungry, reach into this cookie jar instead. If you don’t want to do what you first select, toss that one back in and draw again. It’s a way to pre-plan nurturing activities that you often can’t think of in the heat of the moment.

Be sure they are things you like to do. Otherwise, they’re not likely to win out over the cookie. And remember, it’s okay to have the cookie if you decide you really want it.

STEP 4: EXPERIMENT WITH WHAT YOU EAT

If you don’t find answers to your feelings of food addiction by experimenting with how you eat, it’s time to explore how what you eat might affect you. Try these experiments.

Experiment #4: Eat challenging foods as part of a balanced plan for eating.

Foods that people commonly report feeling addicted to are usually richer foods that are low in nutrients such as fiber, fluid and protein. These nutrients are essential to helping us feel satisfied. If we eat low-nutrient foods when we’re hungry, we may find we need much more of them than “normal” to feel satisfied. This is not addiction but a normal physical response to eating a food that really doesn’t meet our needs.

To find out how much you truly need of such foods to feel satisfied, experiment with eating them as part of meals as described in Experiment #1. You may find your cravings for more of these foods change, especially if you also practice giving yourself permission to eat them at the same time, as described in Experiment #2.

For example, you might have chips with a turkey sandwich with lettuce, tomato and avocado at meals. Or for those who feel like bread is challenging, eating the turkey and veggie sandwich instead of just a salad might be your experiment. You can always have a salad on the side, too.

If you don’t find your response changes, it’s time to look deeper.

Experiment #5: Cut back on sugar for a short time.

This experiment seems to fly in the face of everything we’ve said before. It is NOT something that anyone who is struggling with an eating disorder or feelings of food deprivation should try without the aid of a qualified health professional who is skilled in helping people who struggle with these issues.

The intent is to see if there is an underlying physical issue that may be driving your cravings. The best way to do this is to work with a qualified professional such as a registered dietitian nutritionist who is trained in mindful or intuitive eating.
WORK WITH A PROFESSIONAL TO TRY THESE STEPS:

Initially take a SHORT break from foods or challenging ingredients. Sugar-rich foods are usually the issue, so for two weeks at most, don’t eat any foods that are rich in added sugar. You don’t have to read labels to cut out every gram of sugar possible, just the foods that are typically considered rich in sugar like desserts or sweetened beverages. If you believe artificial sweeteners also cause you to crave sweets, eliminate those, too. You may find eating whole fruits (not juices) helps lessen any cravings you experience during this time.

After the time you decided to try going without, begin to experiment with adding small amounts of these foods back in—say one dessert at one meal a day, two to three times a week. After the time you decided to try going without, begin to experiment with adding small amounts of these foods back in—say one dessert at one meal a day, two to three times a week.

Eat the food as part of a balanced meal that includes enough food to satisfy you and contains plenty of fiber, fluid and protein (that is, fruits, vegetables and protein foods).

Remember to give yourself full permission to eat these foods, without guilt, feelings of remorse, or worries that the food will create problems with your weight. Indeed, learning how to eat these foods without overeating them can be key to solving eating struggles.

Do this in a safe setting, such as at a restaurant or with family or friends, not sitting alone at home.

Spread these experiments out over the week. Instead of eating dessert three nights in a row, skip a couple of nights in between.

Don’t try this during an emotional/stressful time.

If after this experiment, you find you still feel intense cravings for certain foods, revisit Step 1. How we think about food can have a potent effect on how we respond to it.

One strategy we highly recommend is to begin talking to yourself differently about your reaction. Instead of telling yourself “I can’t control this,” try “This food doesn’t make me feel well. Do I really want it?” This makes what you eat your choice, not an inevitable result of your environment. Consciously reframing such thinking puts you in charge, and that can make a world of difference to how you manage your eating.

STEP 5: FRONTLOAD SELF-CARE

Our physical well-being powerfully affects our emotional well-being.

If we’re not getting enough sleep, enough physical activity, or enough of the nutrients our bodies and minds need to function well, we can set the stage for emotional overeating.

Lack of these important components of a healthy lifestyle can negatively affect our appetite regulatory system and cause food cravings. The lack can also make us feel depressed, apathetic and more, increasing the odds of turning to food for comfort.

By regularly getting these things up front, we reduce the potential to find ourselves in a state where food becomes the quickest and most appealing way to help ourselves feel better, at least in the moment.

Self-care is difficult for some of us because of past experiences. If this is true for you, consider working with a therapist who can help you move forward in this area.
Ways to Feel Better

On the brain level, we can enhance our feelings of pleasure in a variety of ways that both help us feel better and less drawn to foods rich in fat, sugar and salt. Consider these ideas.

Get social. Social support is one of the best predictors of positive change. It can also both increase the amount and sensitivity of brain receptors that are involved in getting pleasure from food. That means it can take less food to produce the same amount of pleasure.

In particular, the feeling of cooperation and sense of self-worth that we get from sociability is at work here. Also, pairing exercise with social interaction as in recreational sports may improve our pleasure response.

Some of us are natural introverts, others extroverts. That means the need for connection can vary from person to person. So find the amount that’s right for you.

Get active. Exercise in general plays a number of roles to help us manage eating.4–9

• Increases hormones and other substances responsible for a feeling of satiety.

• Decreases stress and thereby stress eating.

• Improves sleeping patterns, which positively impacts hormones involved in the appetite regulatory system.

• Encourages endorphin production, those feel-good chemicals that can boost our mood immediately.

• Promotes serotonin production and use, which can help us feel better all the time.

• Improves dopamine concentration in the brain, delivering a steadier stream of feel-good chemicals without using food.

Sing like no one is listening. Singing in the shower or car is perfect for the tone-deaf among us. Or enjoy any other form of music. It lights up the pleasure regions in our brains, too.

Laugh often. Whoever first said laughter is the best medicine was a genius. Research shows its health benefits are far-reaching—protecting heart health, supporting the immune system, helping control blood sugar in diabetes and increasing tolerance to pain.10 It’s contagious, too. As the saying goes, “Laugh and the world laughs with you.”

HOW WE CAN HELP

Since 1973, Green Mountain at Fox Run has helped thousands of women overcome feelings of food addiction with our pioneering non-diet program. In 2015, we opened our insurance-reimbursable Women’s Center for Binge & Emotional Eating.

Contact us at (800) 448-8106, (802) 228-8885 or info@fitwoman.com to talk about how we can help you end your struggle with eating and weight.

For more information, please visit our website at www.fitwoman.com