



Gia Marson, Ed.D., and Danielle Keenan-Miller, Ph.D.  
The Binge Eating Prevention Plan

# Did the Holidays Trigger Emotional Eating?

To cope with guilt, anxiety, and stress, start counting memories, not calories.

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 Reviewed by Ekua Hagan



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## KEY POINTS

- Money, lack of sleep, socializing, alcohol, and conversations centering around food and appearance are common emotional eating triggers.
  - Emotional eating happens when a person uses food to cope with extra stress, anxiety, or negative emotions.
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*This post was written by  
Gia Marson, Ed.D.*

While the holidays are marketed to us as the happiest time of the year, for many this is not the case.

If you turned to food to

manage intense emotions—a practice known as emotional eating, binge eating, or compulsive eating—and are uncertain about how to deal with the consequences, it may be because:

- Your emotions are intense
- You have high standards
- You compare yourself harshly to others
- You don't know how to stop impulsive behavior

Eating special foods when celebrating is a normal part of many traditions. If you find yourself looking back at how you

As for the future, improving your ability to cope with negative emotions can make a real difference.

## Identify your triggers

Identifying the triggers that lead you to lose control when it comes to food is an important step in creating healthy habits. Common triggers associated with the holidays can include:

**Money:** Dollars spent on gifts, travel, or socializing—or feeling guilty for not spending enough—can lead to feelings of anxiety and stress.

**Lack of sleep:** Fitting in time to buy gifts, attend events, and commute long distances can leave you running on empty when the holidays are over.

**Social situations:** The holidays often bring together people you haven't seen for a while or are meeting for the first time. These social interactions can be uncomfortable, and you may find yourself overthinking what you said or did as you look back.

and behaviors.

**Emphasis on food:** At social gatherings, talk about food and appearances can be expected. Regrettably, this can create pressure to eat less or differently in the new year.

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## 6 ways to cope with post-holiday emotions

When negative emotions get out of hand, it's important that you acknowledge them, tolerate them, and build resilience, instead of pushing them away and trapping yourself in a negative emotion cycle.

short term, but you can miss out on all of the good ones too.

**Check the content of your thoughts.** Are you berating yourself for something (e.g., eating more than usual) over the holidays? As an antidote, change what you are thinking about by recalling meaningful or happy moments. Try this one-minute experiment: Pay attention to all of the details related to one positive memory and notice the way it makes you feel.

**Own the emotion.** If you're feeling overwhelmed, sad, or frustrated, notice what you are feeling and name it. Once you identify an emotion, it can feel less scary and all-consuming.

**Get moving.** A brisk walk, vacuuming, or even singing along with a favorite song can reduce the intensity of negative emotions and keep you from turning to food in response to them.

**Plan ahead.** Actively prepare for how you will stick with what makes you feel strong, grounded, and resilient when inevitable future challenges arise. Consider the predictable triggers mentioned above such as: how you spend money, getting enough sleep, ways to make the most of social situa-

“[S]imply writing down our account of a challenging experience can lower physiological reactivity and increase our sense of well-being, even if we never show what we’ve written to anyone else.” —Daniel J. Siegel, M.D.

**Track your eating without restriction.** Eating foods not in your regular routine over the holidays may have led you to believe that you ate more than you did. or to exaggerate the impact of a few holiday meals. If you are anxious about returning to your usual way of eating, write down what you’re eating now. Doing so may lower your stress response and give you the evidence you need to eat intuitively.

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**Share.** Sharing your feelings with people you trust can be helpful if the urge to emotionally eat or binge eat rises.

## The holidays—and you—are imperfect

There's no such thing as a "perfect" celebration. Things may not have gone as planned, and you may have eaten out of your norm. That's okay! In fact, it's normal. Punishing yourself will only add to negative feelings and intensify negative thinking—and that is likely to exacerbate binge eating, compulsive eating, or emotional eating.

Be kind to yourself. The secret to success...

These strategies are doomed to failure. In contrast, when you accept yourself as an imperfect but eminently lovable human being, and you stop fighting your emotions so strenuously, your fear will often lose its grip over you.” —David D. Burns, M.D.

A simple shift in your perspective can help balance your emotions. Hold on to meaningful memories from the past and look ahead for sparks of joy.

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