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The Binge Eating Prevention Plan

GUILT

Is Food Guilt Complicating the Way You Eat?

Say good-bye to feeling guilty about what or how much you eat.

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Reviewed by Michelle Quirk

KEY POINTS

- **Food guilt occurs when—after eating—you feel as though you have done something morally wrong.**

- **Treatment for food guilt is possible. Understanding primary and secondary emotions when it comes to eating can help.**

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By Gia Marson, Ed.D.

For many of us, eating is a whole-body experience. We don't just bring our physical hunger to the table, we also bring our food-related judgments, along with our emotions. We might eat because we're celebrating being with family or as a reward for a job well done. Occasionally we may eat because we're bored or feeling blue. Just as we may start out with certain emotions when eating, we also may feel many different emo-

Unfortunately, many individuals experience self-criticism, anxiety, or stress after eating. These judgmental, negative thoughts about eating may lead to feelings of guilt.

Characteristics of Food Guilt

Food guilt is feeling as though you have done something wrong after eating. Typically, this occurs after eating food that you or others perceive as “unhealthy” or “bad.” Food guilt may also occur after eating a certain amount of food, after eating between meals, after snacking, after unplanned eating, or with eating after dinner.

It is common for many people to experience guilt after eating at one time or another. After all, no one has a perfect relationship with food. However, if food guilt occurs often and you are preoccupied with food or you alter your normal eating patterns (such as limiting food intake, skipping meals, banning certain foods, or starting a diet), this is when it may become an issue. If left untreated, food guilt may lead to disordered eating or an eating disorder.

to eat mindlessly or to continue beyond the point of fullness.

Additionally, without knowing the cause, how can you address what is really bothering you? Food guilt can bring about real, negative consequences that may impact your health, coping mechanisms, happiness, self-esteem, and relationships.

Primary and Secondary Emotions

Research on what's called "loss of control eating" shows that binge eating and emotional eating—as well as the guilt, disgust, or shame that may follow—are often preceded by intense, negative emotions. Learning to tolerate negative emotions can reduce food guilt, emotional eating, and binge eating.

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To overcome food guilt, it's important to understand primary and secondary emotions and the differences between them. Primary emotions are your initial direct reactions to an event or situation. They are considered to be basic emotions that are hardwired. Examples of primary emotions are fear, hurt, sadness, happiness, and joy. When you experience something difficult, your primary emotions may awaken vulnerability and sensitivity. Because primary emotions can be uncomfortable and deeply felt, you may try to escape them at times.

Secondary emotions follow primary emotions in a given situation. They are generally learned responses that may be covering up a more sensitive emotion. Guilt is often a secondary emotion.

her job. Her *primary emotion* was fear. Lana went home and began to worry—about her job security, about paying the bills, about looking for a new job, about what others would think of her if she became unemployed. She found herself mindlessly snacking on chips that evening, and then afterward she felt guilty. The belief that she ate a food she shouldn't have led to feelings of guilt, her *secondary emotion*.

THE BASICS

Coping With Guilt

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Asking Yourself, “What’s Under This Emotion?”

If feeling guilty after eating is not understood, it can take over and lead to advanced food guilt and impact mental health. To get out of the negative cycle, you can try this instead:

- Accept that imperfect eating is not a moral failure.
- Tap into the primary emotion that your secondary emotion followed.

- Next, reflect on the situation associated with the negative primary emotion.
- With your primary emotion identified, place your attention where you need it most. Make space to take care of yourself emotionally. When you are ready, brainstorm options for coping with the difficult situation you are facing.
- The secondary emotion of guilt should diminish as you allow yourself to acknowledge your primary emotion.

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Seeking professional advice may help you to better understand how to practice uncovering your deeper, sensitive,

Strategies for overcoming food guilt will depend on the extent and occurrence of guilt after eating. Those with a low-to-moderate experience of food guilt can adopt simple activities to help with or even overcome food guilt, such as these:

GUILT ESSENTIAL READS

The Difference Between Guilt and Shame

The Guilt That Women Suffer

- Practice being in the present moment so you can move on without ruminating.
- Let go of judging thoughts and food labels such as good or bad, healthy or unhealthy.
- Eat mindfully by paying attention to your emotions and sensations of hunger and fullness.
- Identify primary emotions, while noticing that they come and go.
- Exercise.

with food.

- Apply self-compassion when dealing with hard times, using a gentle tone and kind language.
- Ask for support when you need it, even if you think you *should be able to* handle a situation without help.
- Get adequate sleep to regulate and balance your emotions.
- Remind yourself that sometimes turning to food for comfort is OK.

If you have pervasive food guilt, you may want to **seek a professional to help you**. Common treatments include, but are not limited to, interpersonal therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, intuitive eating, nutrition counseling, dialectical behavior therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, mindfulness-based eating therapy or mindfulness-based nutrition counseling, somatic therapy, and cognitive-affective therapy.

Summary

to cause much harm. However, if food guilt is a regular experience in your life, it may lead to problems that would benefit from intervention.

Dealing with and overcoming food guilt is a process, not a quick fix. But if you are willing to put in the effort, it is worthwhile! You can overcome your food guilt and the emotional habits that got you into the cycle to begin with. You will also be able to have a more peaceful and enjoyable relationship with food.

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