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Sue Ann Says: Recognize and Break Free from Emotional Eating

Last week as we were driving home from a health fair in central Wisconsin, we got to talking with Ashley Goddard, a health promotion specialist at WPS Health Insurance, about dieting and eating and why we crave carbs as the summer turns to fall and the holidays approach. I've always said it's because we need to fatten up for the winter to keep warm – yeah, right! Actually, it's not that far from the truth. Early humans beefed up before the long winters because food would be scarce; those extra layers of fat helped them survive. That primal instinct is still within us, but because food is so plentiful now and we no longer need to forage for it, we just keep packing on the pounds.

And then Ashley brought up emotional eating. As soon as she started explaining what it is and why it happens – BINGO! – we all saw ourselves to some degree.

Emotional eating is eating for reasons other than hunger," says Ashley. "Instead of the physical symptom of hunger initiating the eating, an emotion triggers it like loneliness, poor self esteem, boredom, anger, fear and so on. "

In many ways, we're all emotional eaters. Food is the centerpiece of most social events and it's a way of bringing people together. But when eating habits are driven by feelings rather than hunger... that's emotional eating.

As children many of us were rewarded with sweets, and women unconsciously mimic this reassurance by rewarding themselves with comfort food that's filled with sugar or other refined carbs. But there's a physiological pull at work here as well. Sweets trigger the release of serotonin, the feel-good hormone. Unfortunately, that good feeling goes away quickly leaving us feeling guilty or shameful, only adding to our emotional state.

Are you an emotional eater?

- Do you eat when you feel a strong emotion like anger, stress, anxiety, sadness, and even happiness?
- Do you mindlessly eat when you're bored and have nothing to do?
- As a child, were you offered food if you were hurt or as a reward?
- Do you feel unsatisfied after eating something you craved?

The good news is that although emotional eating is a learned behavior, you can overcome it mostly through behavior modification. Ashley offered the following ways to help break the vicious emotional eating cycle:

1. Learn about yourself:

Emotional eating is used as a coping strategy, but it doesn't actually help you cope with anything in the end. Instead, identify those self-defeating, destructive attitudes, thoughts and emotions; identify what triggers them. Then, write them down and own them. Just by recognizing these things, you've made great strides.

2. Take baby steps

No one said that behavior modification was quick and easy. But, persistent, thoughtful steps will help you overcome emotional eating.

- **Keep a food journal**

Record everything you eat and how you are feeling at the very moment you take a bite, while you are eating, and how you feel afterward. Record the triggers and types of food you most often turn to. You'll be able to see in black and white why you overeat and how it makes you feel – information you can reflect on and learn from, helping you develop conscious eating habits down the road.

- **Talk positively to yourself**

Before you reach for that brownie or extra helping at dinner, ask yourself: Am I physically hungry (see sidebar)? Will this food really make me feel better? Even if you end up eating the food, it forces you to confront why you're eating it to begin with. By making the act of eating a conscious thought, you can overcome bad eating habits.

- **Refocus your thoughts**

If your emotions are getting the better of you, instead of raiding the pantry, choose something else that makes you feel like you're accomplished something. Take the dog for a walk, schedule appointments you've been putting off, weed the garden. When you find something you really enjoy doing, write it in your journal.

3. Ask for help

Recruit a buddy who understands your situation to help provide support. For some, therapy with a health professional may help.

If you've identified yourself as an emotional eater, take comfort in knowing that you're not alone; almost every woman has faced this issue. Taking the first steps toward breaking the emotional eating habit is hard work, but you CAN do it. Take advantage of the great resources recommended by Ashley:

“Intuitive Eating” by Elyse Resch, Geneen Roth’s website, www.geneenroth.com, and the Appetite Awareness Workbook by Linda Craighead.

Because it all begins with a healthy woman...

Sue Ann Thompson is founder and president of the Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation (WWHF), a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, and early detection of diseases that affect women the most; connects individuals to health resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. To learn more, visit wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.

((sidebar)) Physical Hunger vs. Emotional Hunger

- Emotional hunger comes on suddenly; physical hunger occurs gradually.
- When you are eating to fill a void that isn't related to an empty stomach, you crave a specific food, such as pizza or ice cream, and only that food will meet your need. When you eat because you are actually hungry, you're open to options.
- Emotional hunger feels like it needs to be satisfied instantly with the food you crave; physical hunger can wait.
- Even when you are full, if you're eating to satisfy an emotional need, you're more likely to keep eating. When you're eating because you're hungry, you're more likely to stop when you're full.
- Emotional eating can leave behind feelings of guilt; eating when you are physically hungry does not.