

## Identifying Hunger

Following is a review of the cues both your body and your mind give to signal hunger:

<b>Physical signs of hunger</b>	<b>Emotional signs of hunger (and what these might be saying)</b>
Growling (gurgling) sounds in bowel and stomach	Anxiety: need for exercise and movement
Actual twinges of "pain" throughout digestive tract	Boredom: need for attention
Light-headedness	Fatigue: need for escape
Difficulty concentrating	Loneliness: need for reward
Irritability	Stress: any strong or submerged emotion
Feeling faint	
Headache	
Thirst	

There is nothing wrong with feeling hungry for any reason, as long as we are aware of what our minds and bodies are telling us. And there is nothing wrong with responding to these signals of hunger.

You need not have guilt, anger, or frustration at feeling either kind of hunger or your response – as long – as you maintain awareness. If you are feeling physical hunger, your challenge is to determine how physically hungry you really are. Are you ravenous or only slightly hungry? Do you continue to eat even after you are no longer feeling hungry?

Before you eat, carefully consider your hunger level on the scale below. You should think about keeping your eating between a 3 and 5. When you begin to feel the first signals that you are hungry, level 3, or strong signals that you are hungry, level 4, it is important to eat. Eat slowly without distractions and listen to your body as it becomes satiated. Plan to stop eating at a level 5 without exceeding it. Listening for your body's hunger signals takes practice, as well as stopping when you are *comfortable*, and not overly full.

### **Hunger Rating Scale**

- 10 = absolutely stuffed
- 9 = so full you are starting to hurt
- 8 = very full
- 7 = starting to feel uncomfortable
- 6 = slightly overeating
- 5 = perfectly comfortable
- 4 = first signals that it is time to eat
- 3 = strong signals that it is time to eat
- 2 = very hungry; irritable
- 1 = extreme hunger; dizzy

Most people judge nonphysical hunger (i.e., emotional hunger) as “bad”. Many say eating to quiet these hungers is “wrong”. Let’s think about this from a different perspective. Eating for emotional purposes is one way of taking care of your personal needs – such as protecting yourself from feeling some very deep emotional hurt, or soothing yourself when you are stressful or calming yourself when you are anxious. While there may be unhealthful physical consequences of your emotional eating, this response *is* fulfilling an emotional need.

What is “wrong” or “harmful” is not identifying your feelings before you respond to this emotional hunger by eating. For example, suppose your best friend leaves town on a two-week vacation. Suddenly you are starving for a big ice cream cone! Are you really “food” hungry, or are you “hungry” for your friend? Are you lonely rather than ravenous? Recognizing your feelings will make it easier to choose not to eat and to find an alternative activity to relieve the “hunger.” Review suggestions on “Alternate Response for the Week” handout.

When you notice emotional hunger is taking place, consider trying the following responses.

- Admit you are *not really* hungry.
  - Give yourself permission to eat, but *wait 5 minutes* before you actually do. Allow yourself time to identify the emotions behind your “hunger.”
  - During this five-minute wait, try to recall what you were *thinking* or *feeling* before you began to “feel hungry.”
  - If you can’t remember, ask yourself if you are *still* hungry.
  - If you respond “yes”, remember food won’t fix or cure or take care of your feelings. These feelings will still be there even after you eat.
  - Once you recognize you are not physically hungry, and you can identify the feelings underlying your emotional hunger, you can consider your *alternative pathways* to taking care of your needs.
  - If you are unable to come up with other alternatives that work, remember you can still eat as a means of self-care. But recognize what you are doing: eat exactly what you want and stay fully alert to how your body and mind react. Being aware of what you are doing is critical to healthful lifestyle change. Maybe next time you are having the same feelings, you will choose a different response.
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