

How Stress Affects Our Eating Behavior

Presented by
CIGNA Employee Assistance Program



Seminar Goals

- Recognize the cues that trigger poor eating choices.
- Understand the five challenges to nutritious eating.
- Learn coping strategies you can put to use for better nutrition and to lower stress.



Cues that Trigger Poor Nutritional Choices

- **Social Cues:**
Holidays or vacations with relatives
- **Situational Cues:**
The dessert tray “ceremony” at your favorite restaurant
- **Negative Thoughts:**
“I’m getting older, my best years are past.”
- **Negative Feelings:**
Anxiety, disappointment with self
- **Sudden Stress:**
Moving day, a new job, taxes due



Challenge #1: SOCIAL CUES

Social Eating Cues

Examples: Family Reunions. The Office Party.

1. Eating may be a main activity in some social settings or while relaxing or watching TV.
2. Food and drink can often make us feel as if we belong.
3. Peer pressure to eat can be enormous.



Dealing with Social Eating

Three effective social coping strategies

1. Get support and be accountable
2. Use alternate ways to belong and deal with negative feelings
3. Come prepared



Challenge #2: SITUATIONAL CUES

Situational Eating Cues

Examples: Bad news. The cruise.

1. We seek comfort when lonely or in crisis.
2. We try to avoid negative feelings from bad news or major disappointments.
3. We feel entitled to a little reward on a stressful day.



Dealing with Situational Eating

Three effective situational coping strategies

1. Make sure your “self-care account” is full
2. Plan ahead for a crisis
3. Cope with those impossible (cruise) situations



Challenge #3: NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

Effect of Negative Thoughts on Our Eating The Cycle of Automatic Eating:

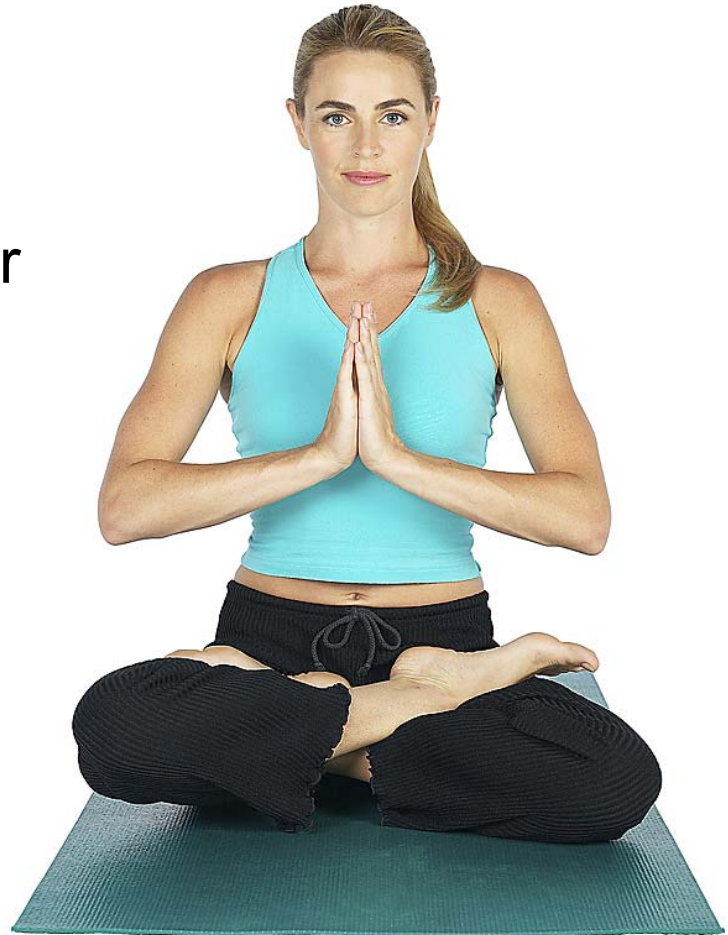
1. We are confronted with an unpleasant situation.
2. We experience immediate, “automatic” negative thoughts.
3. We sense a powerful surge of negative feelings.
4. We resort to unhealthy eating to cope with painful feelings.



Dealing with Negative Thoughts

Beating the Cycle: Two Solutions

1. Interrupt irrational thoughts, then change your cycle
2. Neutralize the power of your automatic thoughts



Challenge #4: NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

Common Thoughts That Can Lead to Negative Emotions

- I've made a mistake, something horrible will happen.
- It is awful to be criticized.
- I must be in control at all times.
- I must have things the way I want them.
- I must have somebody's shoulder to cry on.
- My worth = My job performance.



Dealing with Negative Emotions

Avoid Negative Moods by Challenging Your Negative Conclusions – Ask Yourself...

- How would I encourage my best friend in a similar situation?
- How important will this issue seem in the future?
- Did I do the best I could under the circumstances?
- Am I “catastrophizing,” ignoring more accurate information?
- Are my thoughts a result of being physically tired, emotionally exhausted, spiritually depleted or eating poorly?



Challenge #5: SUDDEN STRESS

Do you know your nutritional “stress style”?

- **Stress Foods** – Which foods do you eat or not eat in a crisis?
- **Stress Quantities** – At what amount are you “stress-eating”?
- **Stress Situations** – What situations “catch you every time”?
- **Stress Emotions** – What emotions do you usually try to avoid when you “stress-eat?” (P.S. – “Stress” is not an emotion.)
- **Stress Eating Alternatives** – Non “stress-eaters” aren’t perfect. They’ve just mastered **step one**: Not using food to cope.



Dealing with Stress-Related Eating Patterns

- Call on people instead of food to deal with stressful events.
- Nurture yourself with non-food items in times of crisis.
- “Fuel your body” to deal with surprise stress with a nutritious breakfast; then tackle lunch, dinner and snacks.
- Build in a stress margin by scheduling refreshing activities into your week first (even if you don’t get to do them all.)
- Surround yourself with good role models who don’t eat under stress. Don’t be afraid to ask them their secrets.

