

BEATING BINGE EATING

A GUIDE TO HELP YOU BREAK THE CYCLE,
HALT THE HEARTACHE AND DEVELOP
A HAPPY RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

What is Binge Eating?	05
Why Do I Binge?	06
Genuine Hunger	06
Rebellion Against Rules	07
A Coping Mechanism	09
Habit	10
What Can I Do About It	12
What Doesn't Work	13
Rigid Dieting	13
Vowing to be Stronger	14
A Big Goal	15
Beating Yourself Up	17
Things to Practise	18
Curiosity Over Guilt	18
Explore Your Food Beliefs	19
Practise Food Skills	24
Label the Emotion	30
Reduce Chaos	32
Conclusion	36
Resources & References	38

WHY THIS GUIDE?

You think it's your secret shame. A stupid problem that you have. One that no one seems to understand and, no matter how hard you try, one that you can't seem to fix.

You are not alone.

We've put together this guide, not only because we have lessons to share from our own personal challenges with binge eating over the years, but because of conversations we have on a weekly basis with our members at AKR Fitness.

Problems with our relationship with food are very common.

We wrote this guide to help.

WHAT IS BINGE EATING?

Ok so what are we talking about here?

Well, what we're not talking about, is merely eating too much food. Occasionally overeating and feeling a little full is not what we're classing as a binge for the purposes of this guide.

Having pizza and a glass of beer or wine on a Friday night isn't enough to call it a binge ... even if it's followed by a scoop of ice-cream. That's (maybe) just eating too much. Eating too much might not be very helpful, but true binge eating is a different animal altogether.

Some of the recognisable signs of binge eating include:

- Feeling a loss of control around food.
- Feeling compelled to continue eating beyond fullness.
- Eating a vast amount of food in a short space of time.
- Eating very rapidly.
- Feeling a rush or "release" or sense of excitement as you "go for it".
- Feeling a sense of carelessness or destruction.
- Sneaking food or eating in private.
- Feelings of guilt and shame after eating.
- Vowing to be even stricter and more disciplined ...starting tomorrow.

WHY DO I BINGE?

Below, we've outlined four main reasons that seem to trigger binge eating.

1) GENUINE HUNGER

Sometimes we feel compelled to eat because we actually need to eat. In desperation to lose weight, it's common for people to go on diets that severely restrict calories or important macronutrients like carbohydrates or fat.

Starve yourself of calories or macronutrients and your body will give you strong cues to eat. Why does our body do this? Because food is required for survival. Your body is hungry for nutrients and wants to maintain its weight.

When, inevitably, you succumb to the extraordinary power of the cravings, the floodgates open. You eat and eat and eat. The technical term for this is Post Starvation Hyperphagia.

You experience an increased sensation of hunger and overeating as your body attempts to restore the lost body weight.

If you're desperately trying to lose weight, this loss of control and overeating feels terrible. You feel you've undone all your good work. You may be riddled with feelings of frustration and guilt. In order to get back on track, you compensate for the binge by severely restricting calories again.

... And so the cycle repeats and the pattern becomes that little bit more ingrained.

2) REBELLION AGAINST RULES

Aside from severely restricting calories, another commonly practised, weight-loss strategy is to avoid particular foods or food groups.

Almost every diet comes with a list of what to eat ... and what to avoid. Even if you choose not to follow a formal weight-loss diet, it's likely you'll draw up some sort of mental list of what you intend eating more of and which foods are now off the table.

In fact, this idea of good and bad foods – the idea that some foods are holy and healthy and slimming while others are sinful, indulgent and fattening – is so pervasive in our culture that you don't even need to draw up a list. It's been done for you. It's a given.

Hamburgers, chocolate, cakes, crisps and cookies are considered "bad".

Kale and broccoli and spinach are seen as "good".

You want to lose weight, so you decide to avoid all of the "bad" foods and focus on eating the "good".

In many ways, this makes complete sense.

Except that... Let's not forget, you do like some of those "bad" foods. Indeed, you probably LOVE some of those "bad" foods. They can be very appealing and at some level you do want to eat them.

REBELLION

These diet rules – not being allowed to eat what you really want to eat – can feel controlling. Maybe not at the outset when motivation to change is high and you're even excited about the diet or this latest health kick. But sooner or later even self-imposed rules can feel controlling.

... And nobody truly likes to feel controlled.

When we feel controlled, usually, we rebel. It might take some time. You might comply for a while. But before long, you break the rules. Maybe you've had a bad day and need a pick-me-up. Maybe you just feel like being naughty. You'll find all manner of ways to justify it but you're tired of feeling controlled and you're going to break the rules.

CELEBRATION

Even if you don't "break" the rules as such, you are going to eat those forbidden foods again. Let's consider the opposite: let's say you stay on track. Let's say you've been "good", as dieters tend to say, for an entire month. How do you reward yourself?

Well of course you go for some of those so-called bad foods that you love. A treat. You've earned it after all. Besides, it's not like you were giving up bread or chocolate forever.

THE SCARCITY PRINCIPLE

When we exclude specific foods or food groups from our diet, we make them scarce. They are no longer available to us. They are limited, rare ... and special. In economics, things that are limited, rare and special – things that are scarce – increase in value.

We know that inevitably – through rebellion or celebration – you will eat those forbidden foods. When you do, the rules are broken.

At that moment a narrow window of opportunity opens up in which you give yourself permission to eat more of those scarce, valuable, forbidden foods. Just this once.

Today is already ruined after all. Tomorrow you'll be "back on it" so it feels a lot like now or never.

It's now. The floodgates open.

You get your fill of all the forbidden foods knowing ... vowing ... promising, that it's a oneoff. An exception. When it's your one and only chance to eat those special foods, it's little surprise that you eat as much as you can before that window of opportunity slams shut again.

When the dust settles, this loss of control and overeating feels terrible. You may be riddled with feelings of frustration and guilt. If you've been avoiding particular foods for some time and find that one little taste of said food – like ice-cream – triggers a binge, it's easy to blame the food itself as opposed to your restriction of the food. It's easy to begin to believe that some foods are addictive and that others have specific ill effects. After all, when you avoided them, you felt great!

So you conclude that the food itself was to blame and you swear off those foods once more. You vow to be even more disciplined.

... And so the cycle repeats and the pattern becomes that little bit more ingrained.

3) A COPING MECHANISM

Eating is a rewarding activity.

Food is far more than fuel. It's rewarding to our brain. If it wasn't, our ancestors wouldn't have taken the risks required to obtain food and we'd have died out a long time ago. Food also has strong roles socially and culturally. We use food to connect with others, to maintain traditions, to help us celebrate and to treat and reward.

Eating can feel good. Eating can give us a lift.

It's not surprising then, that that lift, can become a coping mechanism. Sometimes we eat, not because we're physically hungry, but to distract us from something else.

We eat to avoid feeling unwanted feelings. Feelings of sadness, of loneliness, of guilt. Feelings that we don't even know we're feeling. We just eat. We eat to procrastinate. We eat to avoid doing the work, confronting the issue or otherwise moving our life forward.

Sometimes there's a rush of excitement when we decide to go for it. Sometimes we even experience a high. Other times it's a numbness. We eat and we eat. We eat all the rewarding foods until, eventually, it feels more depressing than it does pleasing.

The dust settles.

We vow not to do it again. But we were not even really aware of what we were doing, which makes it very difficult to do anything different next time.

... And so the cycle repeats and the pattern becomes that little bit more ingrained.

4) HABIT

A large chunk of our behaviours is automatic. Subconscious. It has to be this way. There are so many complex tasks to do that we simply cannot pay attention to every little detail all of the time. We'd be utterly overwhelmed.

More or less anything we practice repeatedly, becomes a habit. Binge eating included. As the cycle goes round and round it becomes more and more ingrained. Before long, it's just what we do.

A habit is made up of three parts:

1. A trigger: the thing that cues the behaviour.
2. A routine: the behaviour itself.
3. A reward: the outcome we get from the behaviour.

While binge eating might have initially developed from something simple – like cutting too many calories – over time, the habit can become pretty complex. The routine (the binge itself) might remain consistent but now there are multiple triggers and a variety of rewards.

Sometimes the trigger is eating a “forbidden” food, sometimes it's a celebration, sometimes you're hungry and sometimes you just scream “to hell with it!” and stride defiantly down the path of rebellion.

Sometimes the reward is a distraction from something else. Sometimes it's an emotional lift. Sometimes it's sating hunger and cravings.

It can become a jumbled-up mess and half the time you're not even aware you're bingeing until it's too late and that sinking feeling of heartache and guilt and helplessness descends once again.



WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?

BEFORE WE GO INTO
SOME THINGS TO WORK ON,
LET'S DISCUSS A FEW
COMMON APPROACHES
THAT ARE UNLIKELY TO HELP.

WHAT DOESN'T WORK

RIGID DIETING

This one should be somewhat obvious by now. If binge eating is something you struggle with, and if severely cutting calories or eliminating particular foods or food groups from your diet tends to provoke binge eating, guess what you need to stop doing?

You might be desperate to lose weight, but while you're bingeing, you'll continue to sabotage yourself.

Going ever stricter with your diet can seem like the answer. It seems easier to avoid biscuits altogether than to have the occasional biscuit and not devour the whole packet.

But going ever stricter is a dead-end road. It just doesn't work. Besides, would you really want it to work? Would you want to be the person who is so rigid about their eating that they cannot socialise? Would you want to go the rest of your life without enjoying a dessert or some chocolate or home bakes? Do you want to be the person who is always just a single Hobnob away from self-destruction?

Let's set the diet rules aside for the time being and work on addressing the binge eating habit first. Aside from severely restricting calories, another commonly practised, weight-loss strategy is to avoid particular foods or food groups.

VOWING TO BE STRONGER

When we've reached that stage of "enough is enough" sometimes we feel a surge of resolve. We make a stand. From now on, it's going to be different. We'll be stronger than before. More disciplined. We've learned from our mistakes and we simply won't do it again.

We make these vows partly to help us feel better about ourselves post binge. It's known as "false hope syndrome." We hatch a plan to give ourselves a lift in the moment. We genuinely believe we will change. But it's the present bias talking. We're unaware that what we're feeling is just what we're feeling right now.

We forget that on another day, in another moment, we'll feel differently. Some days will be long and hard. Maybe we'll be tired or emotionally low. Maybe we'll have serious chocolate cravings and we'll probably do what we've done many, many times before. We'll justify it in the moment so we feel ok about it – that's that present bias again. But the binge eating pattern continues.

Willpower has its limits. The more willpower we use, the less we feel we have to use. Vowing to be stronger ignores the fact that you won't always feel as strong as you feel right now. It's a momentary pick-me-up that ignores any actual strategy for change.

A BIG GOAL

Another common approach is to set yourself a massive goal. You vow to lose x amount of weight by Christmas or for your holiday. You decide to make a big project out of it with public accountability, before and after photographs and a blog. You make a bet or a promise to someone else. You find some big thing to fire you up and motivate you to behave differently.

Motivation is important and, yes, it can help.

But ... There is more than one type of motivation, and what we're talking about here – external motivation: using something outside of yourself to fire you up or cajole you into action – tends to be short-lived.

When fuelled by external motivation, you behave a particular way, not because you like to or want to or because it reflects your values. No, you behave that way – you do the thing – because of the goal. Because you have to.

The problem with this is that it can feel controlling. Not only can this lead to rebellion, but it also means that when the goal is no longer present the helpful behaviour goes away too. There's little value in riding a highly-motivated three months without bingeing, getting in shape for a big goal and then falling back into binge eating again for the next decade.

Besides, a lack of motivation wasn't the cause of your binge eating behaviours in the first place! As we saw above, there are other reasons you binge, and it would be more helpful to address those.



BEATING YOURSELF UP

Beating yourself up is a very common tactic. ... If we can call it a "tactic". Ok, you feel like crap. You're annoyed at yourself. You're frustrated and exasperated at how many times you've done the same thing yet continue to sabotage yourself. Not to mention what your binge eating is doing to how you feel about your body.

It sucks.

But you don't suck. Bullying yourself into change is a poor strategy. Using guilt and shame and negative self-talk will only make you feel bad. ... And when you feel bad, you're more likely to make a choice that will help you feel better right now – in the moment – than you are to do something for the betterment of your future self.

... And what's the quickest, easiest way to feel better in the moment?

Well we know exactly what that is and it's why you're reading this guide.

Yes, the behaviour is unhelpful. But it doesn't make you any less of a person. Stop beating yourself up and let's move on and work on some solutions.

THINGS TO PRACTISE

CURIOSITY OVER GUILT

As we've said, beating yourself up is an unhelpful exercise. Binge eating is a very common struggle. You are not alone. You are not somehow broken or inept.

Practise being self-compassionate. Be kind to yourself. Treat yourself as you would a younger family member – a grandchild, a niece, a nephew. Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping. That's the tone we want here.

Rather than get guilty, let's get curious about the behaviour. Let's switch off the autopilot and figure out where you're at.

What happened? Why did you binge? Was it genuine hunger? Had you eaten enough over the past few days? How do you know? Had you been trying to be too strict with your diet? Was it a coping mechanism for something else you were feeling or avoiding? Or was it simply something you did automatically out of habit?

Reflect on your binging in general. Then every time you binge, conduct a mini investigation. What was going on? What were you feeling? What triggered it? What made you continue to eat beyond fullness even though you knew you'd suffer for it later?

Buy yourself a journal and get writing.

Why write it down? Because you'll forget. You'll forget how often you do it. You'll forget how you felt in the moment. You'll forget just how many times you keep trying the same things while hoping to get a different result (e.g. vowing to be even stricter!)

Writing it down will help you really dive into your behaviours, your feelings and your influences. You'll spot patterns and have a record of information you can use to help your future self.

EXPLORE YOUR FOOD BELIEFS

Nutrition can be an emotionally charged topic. It can involve personal identity, values – even a person's entire world view. Curiously, while no one believes that any of the beliefs they hold are incorrect, few people are correct about everything.

Could it be possible that some of the things you're certain of when it comes to diet and nutrition might not true? Are you prepared to at least explore some of your beliefs?

Science is the best tool we have to help us set aside the emotion, the bias and the personal stuff and look at what actually is. Studies aren't always perfect but running controlled tests and looking at the overall picture of the literature is the only objective tool we have.

HOW CAN A FOOD BE BAD?

Scientific research shows us that rigid dieting is associated with binge eating. Let's take a step back though: why would we attempt to follow rigid diets in the first place? Why do we sanctify some foods and demonise others?

If we set aside larger food belief systems including environmentalism, animal welfare and religious beliefs, there seems to be two main reasons: to help us lose weight and to be healthier. If we eat the good foods and avoid the bad, we believe we'll be lighter, leaner, purer and happier.

But how, exactly, can a food be "bad"?

Of course a food can taste bad, but that's not usually what people mean when they avoid "bad" foods. Usually people mean bad for weight loss or bad for health.

BAD FOR WEIGHT LOSS?

So what does the scientific literature tell us about weight loss? The research is clear and irrefutable: it's about calorie balance. Eat more calories than you burn and weight is gained. Burn more than you consume and weight is lost.

That being the case, a single food can only be bad for weight loss if it pushes you into a calorie surplus that day or week. Whether that food is chocolate, cheese, chickpeas or chia seeds doesn't matter. For weight balance, it is about calories in and calories out.

Of course some foods contain more calories than others but if you consistently burn 2000kcal and eat only 1800kcal, over time you will lose weight regardless if those 1800kcal come from plants or Pringles.

In a calorie deficit there are no fattening foods; in a calorie surplus, any food is fattening.

BAD FOR HEALTH?

What about foods being bad for health? Isn't diet related to a number of health problems like obesity, diabetes and heart disease?

Yes. But these are problems of excess. Too much of anything can be bad for you – even too much water can kill a person. It would be absurd to conclude because of this that we should avoid water altogether. The poison is in the dose.

Of course there are some situations – allergies, for example – in which a single bite of a particular food can be extremely harmful to a person's health, but that's just not the case for the majority and nor is it the reason why so many people attempt to follow rigid diets.

At first glance, it's easy to consider this an all-or-nothing game: "So what you're saying is I should just eat sweets and chocolate all the time?"

No. What we're saying is that you don't need to completely eliminate any particular food from your diet (unless you have a medical reason to do so).

It seems there will always be another dietary pantomime villain. In the past, butter and eggs were going to kill us and for a while people believed that carbs were fattening. More recently gluten and sugar have been seen as the bad guys. These villains come and go in part because people ignore the basics. It seems we love to zero in on one small aspect of our diet rather than look at the bigger, broader picture – not only of our diet, but of our life.

What we eat can have a tremendous influence on our health and of course it's beneficial to eat nutritious foods, but that's only one part of the picture. A sense of purpose and community in life are as important for our health. As is sleep, play and movement.

Ironically, becoming hyper-focussed on the minutiae of our dietary choices probably isn't a particularly healthy thing for most people to do.

SO I CAN EAT ANYTHING?

Yes, you are a grown adult, you can eat whatever you like.

If you want to eat in a way that supports your health and helps you manage your body weight, we suggest ditching the idea that foods are “good” and “bad” and instead describing your food choices in a more logical, rational way:

1. How calorie dense is the food?

Considering calories is about considering the quantity of food you eat. As far as weight loss or weight gain is concerned, calories are king. Some foods are more calorie-dense than others but that doesn't make them good or bad or fattening. Eating an appropriate amount of food over a given day or week can include eating mix of foods that are high in calories and some that are not so calorie dense.

2. How nutrient dense is the food?

Considering nutrients is about considering the quality of food you eat. To support health we need an abundance of nutrients, vitamins and minerals – from our diet. Some foods are more nutrient dense than others. It would serve us well to include an abundance of nutrient dense foods like fruit and vegetables in our diet.

3. How filling is the food?

Some foods satisfy us, others seem to drive cravings. 200 calories from chicken breast, for example, is likely to keep you fuller for longer than 200 calories from crisps or sweets.

If you're trying to control your calorie intake, it would be helpful to include plenty of filling foods in your diet and only a little of the foods that drive cravings. Protein-dense foods have been shown to help keep us fuller for longer. Foods high in fibre – like vegetables – can also help.

4. How enjoyable is the food?

Here we are back at where we started. If you "never" allow yourself to eat the foods you love, you're sitting on a binge-shaped time bomb.

If you don't like what you eat, it's a matter of time before you choose to eat something you do like.

This matters. This is why it is helpful to include a small amount of not-so-nutritious, possibly calorie-dense foods that you enjoy, in your diet.

PRACTISE FOOD SKILLS

Phasing out the unhelpful moral labels we give our food and working on being more factual about the qualities of our food is a great first step. But ... you may find that your eating habits are still very erratic at times. You'll likely still find things very hard.

It's time to work on some skills.

Yes, food skills.

Knowledge isn't enough to support change. You can't read a book about driving and immediately sit your test. Action is required. You have to sit in the driver's seat and hone the orchestra of skills that make up driving the car.

It's the same with learning a language or learning to deadlift. Anything you want to get good at can be broken into a set of skills and a daily habit of practice.

WHY NOT FOOD?

We've outlined five food skills below that are worthy of practice. Remember the word practice. Skills are not switches we can simply turn on. They take time to develop. They usually feel awkward and difficult at the beginning. Keep practising.

EAT AT REGULAR TIMES

As a binge eater, you might find that your eating patterns have become very erratic. Some days you graze all day, other days you fast or skip meals entirely.

Practising eating at regular times will give you structure and help you manage your hunger and your eating behaviours. Eating at regular times will also help you practise eating an appropriate amount of food at each meal or mealtime.

As much as your schedule allows, try to identify in advance when your meal times are. How many meals or snacks you have is up to you and depends on your preferences regarding meal size and also your energy demands over the day. The times themselves don't need to be exact. Having a window is ok.

Identifying meal times gives you a boundary between eating times and – importantly – noneating times. If it's an eating time, you eat an appropriately sized meal then stop. If it's not an eating time, you don't eat. If you find yourself "starving" between breakfast and lunch, you'd probably benefit from either a more filling breakfast or a mid-morning snack. Adjusting what you eat at meal times will be far more helpful than mindlessly grazing all day or having to react to energy crashes.

This structure can also help you manage the inclusion of spontaneous calorie-dense foods – without things spiralling out of control. If you eat something more calorie-dense than usual, you don't need to call it "bad" and write the whole day off; simply adjust: for example you could skip a snack or eat fewer calories at your next meal.

Similarly, you can make swaps. Perhaps that piece of cake or two you had at the office birthday is equivalent to the calories you'd normally eat for lunch. Rather than feel bad for eating cake and then overeat all afternoon, let's call it lunch and move on.

STOP WHEN FULL

Stop when full. Doesn't it sound so simple? So sensible? You know that overeating sucks. It's likely a serious source of misery for you. Yet, you keep on doing it. If only we could stop when full.

Let's practise!

If you're going to stop when full, two things are required: you have to notice where and when "full" is. And you have to want to stop when you notice it.

Let's start with some strategies for noticing:

1. **Manage your hunger.** If you arrive at a meal feeling "hangry" and desperate to eat, it's going to be much harder not to overeat. Hence the suggestion above to eat at regular times to better
2. **Manage your hunger throughout the day.**
3. **Serve a portion.** Many of us have been raised to clear our plates and will eat everything no matter how big the serving is. Practise serving a portion.
4. **Put the rest away.** Make it a little less convenient to go back for seconds. This will buy you some time after the meal to feel a little fuller. Better still put excess food in a container for another day.
5. **Schedule a "halftime break".** Decide in advance what half of the meal looks like and commit to checking in with your stomach once you've eaten half.
6. **Sit down, slow down.** Take a moment of calm from your busy life. You can afford 10 minutes. Chew and savour your food.
7. **Not now, later.** If you finish everything, wait. Check in with your stomach. Are you hungry in your stomach? You can eat more if you like ...later. Wait 10 minutes and check in again.

Yeah, we know... It's all pretty straight-forward. But you're probably not great at it. So practise.

What's harder though is that sometimes you know you're full, you know you're overeating and you just can't help yourself. In that moment, you don't really want to stop.

In this case – as above – get curious. Ask yourself:

- Where does this path take me?
- How much more do I need before I feel happy and satisfied?
- Am I really hungry in my stomach? Or am I hungry for something else? (See Label the Emotion, below.)

With food, when we're in that moment and it tastes so good, we absent-mindedly fool ourselves into thinking that more and more food equals more and more pleasure or happiness. So we keep on eating. We're already full but we eat as if just one more bite will be perfection. Just one more to satisfy us. We keep eating but the last bite is never as good as the first. We could've stopped earlier and been just as contented. Probably happier than that horrible stuffed-full feeling.

Enough is as good as a feast.

When we recognise that – when we really learn that and can see it in the moment – things get easier.

PRIORITISE PROTEIN

Protein has been found to be more filling than fat or carbohydrates. That means that a higher-protein diet is likely to help you better control your appetite and your cravings.

Protein also helps with the growth and repair of muscle tissue. Muscles are our friend. They help us look toned, they give us strength and they help us move better and age more gracefully.

Eating a protein-dense food at most of your meals is a helpful place to aim for. Be careful of moralising foods again – just because something is high in protein doesn't make it "good" or "bad". Calories, nutrients, how filling and how enjoyable the food is, all still matter.

PLAN & PREPARE

For many people, the challenge isn't the food itself, but being organised around food.

Haphazard eating patterns are often born out of necessity. You're not organised so you pick up whatever is available whenever you can.

Practising being a little more organised will help:

- Compile a list of simple, tasty recipes.
- Compile a list of "emergency" meals – quick and easy options.
- Schedule the food shop and get it done every week.
- Set aside a little time to prepare some meals.

None of this needs to be massive, drastic action. Indeed, massive, drastic action is a recipe for failure. Find a way to make it as convenient as possible and fit it into your life.

EAT LIKE AN ADULT

This last one isn't really a clear skill you can practise but rather an overall theme or mantra for your eating: eat like an adult.

Take some responsibility. Organise yourself. Eat proper meals. Eat your veggies. Stop when full. Sweets and cakes and crisps are ok – just stay away from the extremes. You wouldn't let your child eat nothing but sweets, but nor would you banish them completely. Every tantrum doesn't require chocolate and every celebration doesn't require a blow-out.

On that note, let's move on to emotions...

LABEL THE EMOTION

In “Why Do I Binge?”, we identified eating as a coping mechanism. That is, often we eat not for the food itself but to help us cope with, or distract ourselves from, our thoughts, feelings and emotions.

You might have become great at reflecting on your eating behaviour – practising curiosity over guilt. You might have dropped those moral food labels and become a bit more neutral towards different foods. You might even have levelled up your food skills with a habit of regular, deliberate practice.

Even after all that you might still find yourself slipping into reckless abandon whenever you’re at a low ebb.

If so, it’s time to practise labelling the emotion. ... And it’s as simple as catching yourself and saying what you’re feeling.

Start by asking yourself if you feel hungry in your stomach. If the answer is “no”, ask yourself what it is that you do feel.

I feel...

Tired.

Anxious.

Stressed.

Depressed.

Excited.

Sad.

Lonely.

Bored.

Apathetic.

Whatever it is, say it. Say it and accept that it's ok to feel that feeling. After all, part of being human is feeling all the feelings.

This advice is based on a form of counselling known as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) in which the objective is not to eliminate difficult feelings – difficult feelings are a part of life, after all; rather, it is to be present with what life brings us and to “move toward valued behaviour”.

When you identify what it is you're feeling, when you label the emotion, you open up more options (besides soothing yourself with food) for what that “valued” or more helpful behaviour could be.

If you recognise that you're simply feeling tired, for example, you might also realise that a nap or a relaxing bath would feel better than chocolate. If what you're feeling is loneliness, calling a friend might be more helpful than calling for a pizza.

Some feelings won't have such clear “solutions” but nor need they. Remember the 'A' in ACT is for acceptance. It's ok to feel sad or anxious or stressed. Notice it. Acknowledge it. Accept it. In doing so, in combination with some of the other practices we've suggested, you might find that eating as the answer just doesn't feel as appealing an answer as it once did. Moreover, as it's ok to feel whatever you're feeling, you no longer need a solution.

For more on ACT, including in-depth ways to practise acceptance and “diffuse” from difficult thoughts, feelings and emotions, we highly recommend checking out the book, *The Happiness Trap* by Russ Harris.

REDUCE CHAOS

One final strategy is to look at the broader problem of chaos in our lives.

We have chaotic sleep-wake cycles that set the tone for chaos in our energy, in our so-called "routine". We have chaotic homes full of too much stuff, stuffed chaotically in too many places. Our chaotic food shopping leads to the chaotic eating habits we're trying to address in this guide – eating habits which mirror the chaos we experience in our energy and emotions. ... And we often get too attached to our emotions.

Our chaotic finances expose us to the burden of anxious insecurity and our chaotic relationships eat away at us in the form of guilt and shame and anger and worry and regret. We have chaotic inboxes, chaotic desktops and chaotic phones. Together they bring the chaos of a million open loops - the stuff undone and the tasks unfinished that scratch away at us like a demented puppy inside our brain. Scratch, scratch, scratching away. Pulling at us. Demanding attention. It's called The Zeigarnik Effect. ... And that's before we even consider the chaos many of us experience at "work".

With all that chaos everything is harder. We're just treading water. Chaos is the antithesis of self-renewal. It burns us out.

Having worked with hundreds of different people at AKR Fitness, it seems that the people who are most on point with their health and fitness have the most order in their lives. Maybe that's more luck and luxury than cause and effect. Or perhaps, maybe... just a little more order in your life would help?

Maybe it would bring a little peace to the mind. Maybe it would silence that puppy for a few hours at least. There are some aspects of our lives that we just can't change. Some things are outwith our control.

But there is a lot that is completely within our control.

Could we be a little more organised? Could we have a little more structure and routine in some aspects of our lives? Would this free up some space and mind and energy? Would it help?

Here are six simple chaos-reducing suggestions...

1. Set the Tone

A few small acts of discipline set the tone for the rest of your day (life).

In the army high value is placed on making your bed neatly when you get up. It's not a lifechanging act on its own, but it sets the tone for everything else. Similarly, the "Broken Windows Theory" is the idea that visible signs of crime and antisocial behaviour encourages further crime and disorder. Chaos is the same. Chaos breeds chaos.

- What are you currently doing (or not doing) that breeds chaos?
- What's something simple you could do to set the tone for order?

2. Create A WLWL

A "When Life Works List".

What are the few small things that you find you're consistently doing when life works? On the other hand, when you find yourself in a funk, what best practices are you no longer doing?

- What would you put on your WLWL?
- What are your non-negotiables?

3. Capture Open Loops

“Brains are for having ideas, not for remembering them.”
(David Allen)

All the open loops we have, the unfinished tasks and things to remember can be overwhelming.

Create a capture system for the open loops. Get a notebook, or some sort of online capture system (e.g. Evernote) and write it all down. All the ideas, the tasks, everything. When emails or paperwork come in and cannot be done immediately, have a system to capture them all in as few different places as possible. The stuff is still there, but it's no longer haunting your brain. If it's captured well, you can rest assured that nothing will be missed or forgotten about.

4. Do A Time Audit

You have more time than you think. Oh, you don't agree?

Try this: for a week – or even a few days – write down everything you do for 30-minute intervals for the whole day. It's like keeping a food diary: suddenly you find those extra calories ... or extra time.

Total things up. Look at how much time you're spending on what's trivial vs. what's important to you.

The time is there. How are you using it?

5. Be True To Your Word

If you say you're going to do something, do it. If you're not sure, don't commit. All those broken commitments... all those times you didn't follow through... all those times you flaked out... they all eat away at the trust you place in yourself. If you keep letting yourself and others down, you're going to lose faith. On the other hand, making and sticking to commitments breeds an inner confidence: “If I say something, it's as good as done.”

6. Calendarise Your Priorities

What gets scheduled gets done.

Go back to your WLWL, your capture list and your time audit, and code the items. What's important? What's not important?

Put the important stuff in your calendar. For example, if your workout is key to setting the tone for everything else, get it in your calendar and #JustShowUp. If it's your bedtime, do the same. Set a reminder if you need to.

If there's some project that's important to work on, schedule the time to do it. Free time is a little like saving money. Looking for free time at the end of a day or week is like looking for spare money to save at the end of the month: there won't be any.

To save money, you save it first, and make the rest work. To take care of your priorities, you schedule them first, and make the rest work.

What you choose to prioritise is totally up to you. It's your life, after all.

CONCLUSION

Struggling with binge eating is hard. It can be a heart-breaking cycle that the people closest to you just don't seem to understand.

It is not, however, a problem unique to you. You are not alone. Better still, it is not something you have to resign yourself to. You can change.

Change starts with turning off the autopilot and examining your beliefs and your behaviour. Consider how your actions and your food beliefs might be contributing to your struggle. Commit to practising the food skills that are the hallmarks of a happy relationship with food. Pay attention to your emotions and accept that whatever you feel is ok to feel. Take steps to reduce the chaos in your life and if you're devoid of purpose, go out there and find something to invest yourself in that isn't all about food or physique.

As with any journey of self-development, accept that there'll be bumps and setbacks along the way. Learn from those. Keep your curiosity. Try again. Take another step.

And...

Always Keep Reaching!

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