

Physical Hunger vs. Emotional Hunger

Comes on gradually & can be postponed

Comes on suddenly & feels urgent

Can be satisfied with any type of food

Causes specific cravings, Pizza, chocolate, ice-cream...

Once you're full you can stop eating

Eat more than you normally would. Feel uncomfortably full.

Causes satisfaction, doesn't cause guilt

Leaves you feeling guilty & cross with yourself.

Here are four questions to ask yourself when you need to spot the difference between an emotional tug for comfort and a genuine need for nourishment. The good news is that with some practice, you can become an expert at decoding the meaning behind your cravings.

1) Satisfaction vs. Relief

Do I want to eat for energy to fuel my body to make it through the day, or am I looking for relief or a sense of safety/security?

Test: Place your hand on the part of your body that needs attention. Does it go to your stomach because it is rumbling? Or, does it go to your brain that feels dull and bored?

Fix: Aim to satisfy the part of your body that your hand rests on. If your brain is bored, give it some mentally stimulating material. If your hand traveled to your shoulders, lift and release your shoulders five times to relax your muscles. If it lands on your stomach, mindfully choose a nourishing food.

2) Emotional vs. Physical Hunger

Am I eating in response to physical hunger (rumbling stomach, low energy, etc.) or am I feeling scared, frustrated, overwhelmed or happy?

Test: Ask yourself, “How physically hungry am I on a scale from 1-10 (1 = starving, 5 = satiated 10 = stuffed)?” If you are a 1-5, it’s likely that you do need something to eat. If so, that is okay. If you answer 6-10, it’s likely that food isn’t going to help a bit.

Fix: Try eating a Mandarin orange. They are a great food to help curb emotional eating and to de-stress. It is easy to peel and the segments are perfectly portioned to mindfully eat one at a time. The sweet flavor is satisfying and research has shown that citrus aromas can be calming. Also, a Mandarin orange gives a little boost of vitamin C, just what you need when stressed or emotional.

3) Nutritious vs. Palatable

Am I choosing nutritious rich foods or sugary, fatty salty foods?

Test: A truly hungry person, will eat a large range of foods that will quickly quiet a rumbling stomach. Someone with an emotionally driven craving often only craves a specific type of food or taste — not just chocolate, but chocolate with caramel. If only a salty snack will do, it’s likely that this is an urge for comfort.

Fix: It’s important to keep good tasting, healthy snacks handy. Often, people keep diet foods around that are bland and don’t taste good. Kick up the taste of vegetables with hummus, sprinkle yogurt with some nuts, drizzle chocolate on berries, add a dash of spice to your vegetable soup, etc.

4) Lifelong vs. Transient

Am I building a healthy relationship with food vs. anxiety, guilt or fear.

Test: Before you eat, ask yourself how you will likely feel a minute after you finish this bite. If a negative emotion springs to mind, take a pause. Too often we wait until after we eat to check in with the emotional impact of what we consume.

Fix: Mindful eating can help you build a healthy and balanced relationship with food. Use the 5 “S”s of Mindful Eating no matter what you are eating 1) Sit down 2) Slowly Chew 3) Sense — taste, smell, listen 4) Savor — enjoy 5) Smile (pause before taking another bite). Remember it’s okay to eat the foods you love, as long as you do it mindfully!