

BY TERRI D'ARRIGO

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EMOTIONAL EATING

A Sneak Attack On Weight Loss

What a day. It started with morning traffic and got worse with meetings that dragged on and on when all you could think about was the project that's due tomorrow. Then that jerk cut you off on the way home.

You come in, kick off your shoes, and head right for the kitchen. The next thing you know, you're standing there with an empty potato chip bag in your hands. It was full a moment ago.

You've just engaged in "emotional eating."

"Emotional eating is a common phenomenon in response to stress, sadness, or depression," says David Marrero, PhD, J.O. Ritchey Professor of Medicine in the Division of Endocrinology and Metabolism at the Indiana University School of Medicine in Indianapolis. "It serves as a distraction from what's bothering us."

It also serves as a distraction from your weight-loss efforts. Depending on how big that bag of chips was, in 5 minutes you may have consumed anywhere between 250 and 1,200 calories. So much for the lemony baked fish and steamed vegetables you'd planned for dinner. Chances are your blood glucose isn't going to

respond well, either.

"Part of the problem is the speed with which emotional eating occurs," says Marrero. "You notice when you knock off an entire unit of something, like a box, package, bag, or carton. Then you're full, and at mealtime you won't be hungry."

Don't beat yourself up over it, he says. "It's not a lack of willpower or some kind of moral ineptitude. It's part of our culture to comfort ourselves with food. It's been built in since childhood."

Instead, try to learn from what happened and find new ways of coping with your feelings.

Identify Your Stressors

"When you're calm, sit down and write a list of things or situations that might make you stressed and [that you react to by] eating," says Marrero.

Keep a food diary for a week or two. "Write down everything you eat. You might find you're eating more than you think," he says. Maybe you'll recognize a few patterns. Perhaps the days you've torn into those chips were the days you got stuck in traffic.

Use "Stop Words"

"Stop words" are words you

say to yourself to jar yourself out of stress, and the stranger or sillier they are, the better. "When you find yourself getting anxious, you could say 'pink elephants.' It's incongruent, and you'll really have to think about it," says Marrero.

Stop words can be your signal to do something that doesn't involve eating. Yours might mean it's time to take a walk, play with your pet, or water your plants.

Chew On Alternatives

If all else fails and you still want to chomp down on something, try sugarless chewing gum, Marrero says. "Or you can select foods that work with your diabetes plan and won't affect your weight, like celery sticks. Choose things you can't shovel into your mouth. Choose things you have to crunch."

With three small steps you can cope with stress without waylaying your weight-loss efforts. The next time you get on a scale, you'll feel relieved indeed.

Terri D'Arrigo is an associate editor of Diabetes Forecast.