
Am I Addicted to Food?

By Michelle May, M.D.

Am I addicted to food? This question gives voice to a common fear among people who are stuck in the eat-repent-repeat cycle.



The concept of food addiction is controversial, but more important, it is counter-productive. I'm not denying that people experience feelings of powerlessness over food. However, convincing people that those feelings are the result of addiction leads to only one option: restriction and avoidance. Abstinence may work for drugs and alcohol but food cannot be avoided.

Choosing to limit the exposure to certain "addictive" foods might be helpful at first, but paradoxically, most people discover that restricting the foods they really love only makes the desire for those foods grow stronger. As the cravings intensify, the feelings of powerlessness increase, not decrease.

Further, trying to avoid all of the "addictive" ingredients just distracts us from recognizing the underlying drivers for overeating in the first place. Restrictive eating simply replaces overeating.

Part of what appears to be addiction is the belief that a food is "bad" or you are "bad" for wanting it or eating it. If we eat that food, we experience guilt or shame, perhaps even resorting to secret eating. The thought, "I shouldn't be doing this! I'm out of control!" is followed by the thought, "Might as well eat it all, for tomorrow I'm going back on my diet!"

The other main driver for this addictive-feeling spiral is the desire to eat food you like in order to avoid or suppress feelings you *don't* like. When you eat for reasons other than hunger, the pleasure or distraction is short-lived. The underlying trigger is still present, and thus the cycle continues.

Without a doubt, the eat-repent-repeat cycle* must be resolved - but calling it addiction takes away the power to change and prevents us from learning to use food in an enjoyable, moderate way.

I know without a doubt that mindful eating *can* help people relearn to eat what they love and love what they eat—and deal with their other triggers in more effective ways. The problem is that most people who struggle with the eat-repent-repeat cycle don't even realize that there *is* another option besides abstinence!

What if Food Addiction is Real?

Now for a moment, let's assume that food *can* be an addiction for some people (or at least have addictive qualities). Can mindful eating help with food addiction?

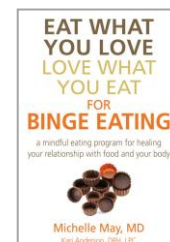
Absolutely! In the article, "How to Break Free of the Addictive Fix," Elisha Goldstein, PhD writes about using mindfulness to address addiction. The article quotes Victor Frankl, respected Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor:

"Between a stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

For example, whenever you feel like eating and pause to ask, *Am I hungry?*, you are creating space between *wanting* to eat (the stimulus) and *starting* to eat (the response). In that space is the possibility for awareness about *why* you want to eat.

If you're *not* hungry and pause to ask *What are my options?*, you give yourself the power to choose your response, so you now have response-ability. Therein lies the opportunity for growth.

Whether food is addictive is the question. Either way, mindful eating is the answer.



Eat What You Love,
Love What You Eat
for Binge Eating:
A Mindful Eating
Program for Healing
Your Relationship
with Food and
Your Body

By Michelle May MD
Kari Anderson DPH

<http://amihungry.com/programs/mindful-eating-for-binge-eating>