

Understanding Our Cravings to Eat



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MA, RD

“I can’t stop thinking about the box of cookies. I think I’m addicted to sugar.”

“I won’t buy potato chips because I’ll eat them all in one sitting.”

“I’m full, but I really want that last slice of pizza.”

Do these thoughts sound familiar for you?

You are not alone. Many books have been written about “food addiction,” but is craving the same as addictive behavior?

Food wanting, food liking, and the brain regions they turn on

According to the influential theory of Dr. Kent C. Berridge of the University of Michigan Psychology Department, food craving comprises two components: Food “liking” and food “wanting”

“Liking” refers to the sensory pleasure derived from eating a given food.

“Wanting” — or desire — refers to appetitive motivation to eat.

What is interesting about the studies of Berridge is that the dopamine “wanting” system in the brain is powerful. Human beings are hardwired for insatiable longing. And this has nothing to do with the substances in foods.

If we aren’t aware of our internal satiety signals, we are capable of continuing to eat, even if the pleasure of eating has subsided. If we switch to another food — dessert, cheese — the pleasure can be prolonged until we’re stuffed, often with regret and guilty feelings afterward.

Feelings of ambivalence around certain foods

It is also possible that if we don’t get something we want, we will “desire” it even more. This often occurs when there is ambivalence about foods. Chocolate, for example, is perceived as highly palatable and emotionally soothing, accompanied by the thoughts that it should be eaten with restraint because it is high in sugar and fat. Attempts to restrict intake, however, cause the desire for chocolate to become more explicit, and then labeled as “a craving.” This, together with a need to provide a reason for why resisting eating chocolate is so difficult, can in turn lead to an explanation in terms of “food addiction” (e.g., “chocoholism”).

The cause is not the substance itself (sugar, fat) nor is it merely brain activation. Rather, it is when the two are combined in a dopamine-reactive brain that manifests the impulsive, mindless desire.

How does the destructive cycle work?

There is a craving for chocolate.

- Experiencing a pleasure of anticipation (“That chocolate looks so good”).
- Having an contradictory thought (“Chocolate is delicious, but it’s not healthy”).
- Engaging in restrictive thinking (“No, I shouldn’t do this”).
- Having an increased desire/want for chocolate (“I really want that chocolate”).
- Feeling a sense of urgency to act (“I need to eat that chocolate right now”).

- Eating the chocolate mindlessly and rapidly.
- Feeling a pleasure reward and a moment of relaxation (“That chocolate really hit the spot”).
- Encountering feelings of shame and guilt until the next craving arises (“I can’t believe I ate all that chocolate. I’m never going to do that again”).

How to break this cycle?

Mindfulness meditation doesn’t make the “wanting” go away; craving is part of our human brain. However, this mindfulness practice can help you alleviate those intense feelings:

- 1. Identify the desire**
- 2. Evaluate the desire**
- 3. Observe the feeling of urgency** (often expressed as physical sensations in the body) without immediately engaging in it.
- 4. Recognize the feeling** of stomach hunger.

It is the process of slowing down, accepting that there is a craving and then meditating on the urge, which is most important to break the chains of the wanting-liking cycle. This way we can find more inner freedom and pleasure in eating from moment to moment.

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She welcomes comments on this article. She can be reached at info@me-nu.org and found online at www.me-nu.org

COMMUNITY WISDOM: We asked our members to share their experience, both personally and professionally, about feelings of food addiction.

Is there a food that you often crave or feel “addicted” to?

“Salt! I love swimming in it and I love eating salty foods. If I’m eating a balanced diet and the salt content is low, I feel like there’s a piece to a puzzle missing. Just a tiny bit of something salty, like a glass of Perrier, is enough to satisfy me.”

~ Linda Richman, RD, CDE Dietitian, Montreal, Canada

“Coffee is my addiction. When I smell it I begin to feel very excited, and a little agitated until I get some.”

~ Victoria Gehlberg, Mindfulness Educator, Melbourne, Australia

“Green tea latte, hot! Gives rise to slight contentment and warmth, and is enough to fill my hunger. ~ Malaysia

“Sweets like macaroons, chocolates, and so on. Stressful emotion is usually associated with this craving, or when I’m tired due to not having enough time to sleep.”

~ Sora Gweon (graduate school student), Seoul, South Korea

“I crave either salted almonds or cinnamon granola, depending on if I want salty or sweet. The craving is associated with the feelings, more than feelings associated with cravings. I am definitely an emotional eater... when I have negative feelings, such as anger or sadness, I go for these foods. If I were more mindful to the situation, I might be able to tell if one or the other was associated with certain emotions.”

~ Marisa L. Creatura, RD, CD-N, Wethersfield, CT

What challenges do you experience in your work with clients who feel addicted to certain foods?

“I notice that when clients are craving certain foods, it is usually due to the need for love, or [an unfulfilled] desire to follow one’s passions.” ~ Shae Clark, USA

“They feel that they cannot have any of the food at all and the more they try to avoid it, the stronger the craving becomes.”

~ Theresa Munkvold RDN, LD, Ames, IA

“The opportunity, rather than challenge, is to explore what the cravings are trying to accomplish. My clients discover intentions of soothing, numbing or distractions from thoughts and emotions that they think will overwhelm them. The challenge is to help clients to validate and stay present with the feelings.” ~ Alice J. Rosen, MSED, LMHC Concord, MA

“The particular food is often a substitute for something more fundamental that they feel they are lacking.”

~ Terhi Summa, Helsinki, Finland

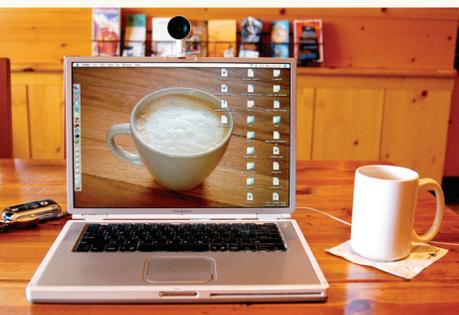
“My findings are that it is much easier to make wise choices for ourselves and from a place of care, rather than fear, once you’ve seen for yourself what the underlying driver is. The cravings can be powerful messengers, if we are open to seeing them as such.” ~ Linn Thorstensson, Cork, Ireland

“A particular client of mine feels addicted to baked goods. Often, she associates the thoughts and feelings around her cravings with a fond childhood memory or tradition. If an opportunity to eat this particular memory-filled baked good comes along, she will, because she doesn’t know when she will be able to have the opportunity again. The trigger for her is not only a fond memory, but time-sensitivity and a sense of urgency. With the above mentioned client, I feel it is very challenging to relay the idea of choosing what you want without thinking that their “addiction” will become worse by choosing to eat these addiction foods more often. Her addiction foods are her “feel good” foods. How do you help someone to realize that healthy foods can be “feel good” foods too?”

~ Marcia Schveibinz, B.S. Nutrition, Columbia, MD

“My biggest challenge is convincing them that they have the power to enjoy the “addictive” food and not eat it excessively. Clients get in the mindset that the addictive food is bad and they can never have it in their house or near them because they will binge it. Breaking them away from this thought is definitely most difficult.”

~ Marisa L. Creatura, RD, CD-N, Wethersfield, CT



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