

WHAT'S IGNITED YOUR WEIGHT GAIN?

Emotional events in life can create the temptation to turn to food for comfort. Danny Fryer looks at these emotional triggers and ways of coping with them



We all face emotionally significant triggers at various points in our lives, including life-changing events such as bereavement and divorce and smaller day-to-day concerns such as work stress and low self-esteem.

Many of us turn to our friends and family for comfort during these times, but for some the emotional upheaval is an opportunity to turn to food.

But why do people comfort eat? Why do people who have done so well at maintaining healthy eating plans sabotage their goals during difficult times, and how can they deal with their responses to emotional triggers when they invariably spring up?

According to Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT), a branch of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), people are not disturbed by the events that happen to them in life, but by the beliefs they hold about those events. More importantly, REBT says that if you are stuck in a self-destructive way of thinking or pattern of behaviour, then there will be a very specific thought or belief behind it.

EASY AS ABC

REBT provides an ABC model of how this operates:

A stands for the activating event

B stands for the belief

C stands for the cognitive consequences

The activating event can be work stress, depression, guilt, or low self-esteem and the cognitive consequences are our thoughts, feelings, symptoms, emotions and behaviours.

Most people go through life claiming that A is responsible for C and say things such as: 'My job makes me so stressed,' or 'My dad makes me feel angry,' or 'I eat because I have no confidence.'

However, if we can accept that an activating event triggers a belief that subsequently results in those cognitive consequences, if we are experiencing an unhealthy negative emotion (such as anxiety) or an unhealthy behaviour (such as comfort eating), then the belief will be an unhealthy one and, while we may not

be able to change the event, we can work on changing the belief. The message is: change the belief and the way we respond to the event will also change.

ACCEPT YOURSELF

For example, Mark had always been close to his mum, ever since he was a young boy. When she died he found it increasingly difficult to cope and turned to food for comfort. Soon, he couldn't stop. 'I felt like there was a big hole in my life where my mum had been, and I was filling it with food,' he explained.

His unhealthy belief was that his mother should not have died, it was awful that she had and he couldn't stand it that she was no longer part of his life. Working on his healthy beliefs instead allowed Mark to work through his negative emotions, accept what had happened, move on with his life and stop comfort eating.

As Mark's case illustrates, the key to responding to different emotional triggers in an appropriate way is to adopt a healthy, flexible philosophy in life; one where you learn to accept the given situation for what it is, conclude that it is bad but not awful, difficult but bearable, and one where you can unconditionally accept yourself, other people or the world around you and move on in a positive light.

HEALTHY BELIEFS

In REBT, unhealthy beliefs take the form of demands, such as 'musts and must nots' and 'shoulds and should nots'. They are unhealthy because they are rigid, unrealistic, don't make sense and don't help us achieve our goals. Healthy beliefs are preferences. A preference (as long as we accept that we may not always get the thing we prefer) is flexible, realistic, makes sense and can help us achieve our goals.

If you can adopt a flexible philosophy, you are much more likely to remain psychologically healthy and in control, and will be more likely to respond to life's emotional trigger points in a healthy way.

However, when we hold demands, we can also hold other unhealthy beliefs such as *awfulising* (the worst thing I can

imagine); low frustration tolerance (I can't stand it) and self-, other- or world- damning (I am useless, you are useless, the world is a useless place). When people hold unhealthy demands, they may also hold either one, two or all three of these additional beliefs.

POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE?

Fortunately there are healthy versions of these beliefs too so, if we can work towards adopting a preference, we can also work towards anti-*awfulising* (it is bad but not the worst thing I can imagine); high frustration tolerance (I find it difficult to bear but I know I can stand it) and self-, other- or world-accepting (I am not useless, you are not useless, the world is not a useless place).

Healthy beliefs don't necessarily lead to healthy emotions, and not all negative emotions are unhealthy. However, REBT makes a distinction between unhealthy negative emotions (such as anxiety, anger or depression) and healthy negative emotions (concern, annoyance or sadness).

That is not to belittle the emotions; you can feel extremely concerned, annoyed or sad but, whereas an unhealthy negative emotion will be in control of you, you are more likely to be in control of your healthy negative emotions.

One of the most difficult life events nearly all of us have to face at some point is bereavement. But how we deal with our healthy negative emotions, such as sadness, and unhealthy negative emotions, such as anger and depression, and the beliefs we attach to them, can have a very different impact on how we cope and recover. **LL**

FURTHER READING

10 Steps to Positive Living

by Windy Dryden

Think Your Way to Happiness
(overcoming common problems)

by Windy Dryden and

Jack Gordon