

# ask Dr Roshan Jain

Your *mental and emotional health* questions answered

**Q** My 24-year-old daughter is working in an IT company and living as a paying guest in Bangalore. She is eating a lot and hence putting on weight. She is also quite sensitive. Please advise me on ways to overcome or control emotional eating?

Emotional eating or 'comfort eating' is a way of using food to make yourself feel better. We all have done it sometime, but are unaware of it.

Recall the character in the movie, *Bridget Jones's Diary*: a young lonely girl who is depressed, as her life is not heading the way she wants. This results in her bingeing on food and wine, and feeling even more miserable afterwards. She puts on weight and this dents her self-esteem further.

Comfort eating can be triggered by a variety of reasons including stress, boredom, frustration, anger, loneliness and depression. Sometimes just to cheer themselves or as a reward when something is accomplished, a person relies on quick boost of energy and feel-good factor from the food consumed. If done repeatedly, it can turn into a learned behaviour or a coping style, resulting in a close association between food and emotions. Therefore, overwhelming situation would lead to higher intake of calories, resulting in weight gain and obesity. But later, the person feels guilty and miserable about episodes of uncontrolled eating even when they are not hungry.

Start with a general health check and recording of BMI (body mass index).

This can act as a baseline record and subsequent comparator. Then I suggest your daughter write a Stress Journal, recording emotional reactions in a variety of situations. Reviewing it will help her identify trends and situations that press her 'comfort-eating' button.

As her self-awareness improves, she can practise delay or distraction from the urge to eat and use alternative strategies to cope. Raise threshold for stress by regular exercise or walk, perhaps yoga thrice a week.

If these steps don't work, then I suggest she consult a mental health expert for evaluation of possible underlying psychological issues or psychiatric ailment that may be contributing to comfort eating, as this can have eventual health consequences. Best wishes!

**Q** When someone is severely overweight and has body image issues, how would you get them to take the first step of joining a gym?

Firstly, this person needs to undergo a complete health check to explore medical conditions that may have contributed to weight gain other than eating habits, and evaluate complications that may have ensued due to severe obesity. Calculating the BMI may be a good start. Offering a systematic feedback about health and illness aspect of obesity may motivate one for change.

If the body image issues have been present before the individual puts on

weight, then that needs psychiatric evaluation to find the underlying eating disorder. Such a disorder can be complicated, but responds well to family or one-on-one talking therapy. Consulting a dietician for advice on healthy eating and cutting non-essential calories would help. Even simply cutting on comfort eating can make a huge difference in reducing further weight gain.

Perhaps, he or she needs confidence building sessions before getting into body toning, fitness and weight reduction programs.

Weight reduction should be gradual. Initially, get him or her to start simple aerobic exercises such as walking on a daily basis. Then set realistic targets with qualitative emphasis on feeling more energised, happy and focused. Offer regular positive feedback and tick off short-term targets. The focus should be on guidance and encouragement.

Our doctors will answer all queries on emotional and mental health. Got mind trouble of your own? Drop us a mail at [bpositiveQA@apollolife.com](mailto:bpositiveQA@apollolife.com) Or write to

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