Battle Binge Eating and Win the Weight-Loss Challenge

If you’ve ever experienced the sensation of losing control over your eating, you know how powerless, demoralizing, and physically uncomfortable it can feel. Even when you want to change these patterns, they can be tough to break. But whether you’re currently struggling with this pattern, or you’ve recently conquered this habit, the right strategies can help you get (and keep) a grip on overeating. With plenty of practice and support, you can learn how to control your eating so your eating doesn’t control you.
Do any of these scenarios sound familiar? They all amount to the same thing: binge eating.

You meant to have just a cookie or two, you really did. But then you felt powerless to stop. Before you knew it, the entire box was gone.

You’re trying to concentrate on work or chores, but all you can think about is your intense craving for chocolate, French fries, or another “trigger” food. Soon, you give up resisting and set off in search of that food, polishing off a huge portion, usually in secret.

You’re bored, lonely, angry, stressed, or sad, aching for a way to feel better. Soon you find yourself eating a platter of cheese and crackers, spoonful after spoonful of peanut butter, or a whole carton of ice cream. You feel awful afterwards—bloating, upset with yourself, and maybe in an even worse mood—but you end up repeating the pattern again and again.

The word “binge” means different things to different people. One person’s binge might be three cookies; someone else’s might be three boxes of cookies. “The official definition spells out three elements of a binge: the amount (larger than most people would eat during a meal or snack); the timing (within a specific time period, usually about two hours); and the emotions (feeling a loss of control while doing it).

Using this definition, the three cookies don’t make the cut. Even if you felt a little out of control while eating them, the amount isn’t excessive enough to officially call it a “binge.” But the three boxes of cookies would qualify as a binge.

If a person experiences true binges at least once a week for at least three months, then the bingeing may have crossed the line into a full-fledged eating disorder called “binge-eating disorder,” or BED for short. (For the exact diagnostic criteria go to NIDDK.gov and search “binge eating disorder.”) But even in those who don’t meet all the criteria for BED, binge eating can still create a serious challenge for achieving or maintaining weight loss.

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What Causes Bingeing and “All Day” Overeating?

Bingeing and overeating can spring from many different sources. Here are some of the primary ones.

Learned behavior
Some may pick up a mindless grazing habit during childhood, such as seeing parents munch on nuts or chips, seemingly on automatic pilot, while watching sports or movies, or munching continuously during parties or other social events. Because overeating is a pattern they’ve witnessed repeatedly, they simply adopt it themselves.

Emotional factors
Some people binge when they feel emotionally out of sorts—stressed out, anxious, sad, lonely, or angry—and they don’t know how to deal with their negative feelings. Research suggests that eating lots of highly palatable foods when you’re stressed out can alter the reward pathways in the brain, making you want more of them. This pattern, in turn, can lead to metabolic changes, weight gain, and more cravings for comforting junk food. A destructive biological spiral that can feel like a trap!

Poor eating habits
Skipping meals or eating erratically can also cause you to become overly hungry, leading you to scarf down food quickly and overeat before you realize you’ve had enough.

Irresistible foods
Certain types of foods—usually those high in starchy carbs and sugar, salt or fat—can trigger overeating, too. Eating these highly palatable foods lights up the reward and pleasure centers in the brain, which causes people to repeat this gratifying experience in the future. Over time, the continuous stimulation of this built-in gratification system overrides your body’s signals of satiety and hunger, leading you to (over) eat even when you’re not especially hungry. While scientists are still sorting out whether people can truly become “addicted” to certain foods the way they can become to drugs or alcohol, many people express that they’ve experienced the phenomenon firsthand.
How to Conquer a Bingeing Habit

Over time, out-of-control overeating can wreck your weight-loss efforts and take a toll on your self-esteem. The best way to kick the habit is to tackle it on multiple fronts.

Eat Regularly
Skipping meals, eating too little during meals, or leaving too much time between meals can lead to ravenous hunger, which can set you up to overeat later. To prevent this unfortunate cascade of events from occurring, have a nutritious meal or snack every three to five hours.

Limit Snacking
While a snack or two a day can help stem a bingeing problem by managing hunger, too much snacking may become the problem itself. After all, “too much snacking” is another way of describing bingeing or all-day eating. Depending on your calorie needs, you could cross the line with just three snacks per day.

Get a Grip on Stress
Reduce stress by learning to manage your time better, delegate responsibilities when possible, and honor your personal limits. You can also learn to relieve stress with the help of exercise, personal downtime, social support, and relaxation techniques. (For more stress-taming solutions, see Session 8: Manage Your Stress, Lose More Weight.)

Catch Yourself When You Slip
If you find yourself snacking mindlessly or overindulging in one of your trigger foods, hit the brakes, remind yourself of your goals, and redirect yourself toward a more constructive activity. By staying positive, you can prevent a lapse in self-control from turning into a complete collapse of your weight-control efforts. (If you need help avoiding negative thinking during a slip, review the “Trashing the Trash Talk: How to Silence Your Inner Critic” session.

Come to Your Own Emotional Rescue
If you’ve recently eaten but have the urge to keep going, reflect on the emotion at the root of that desire, and try to find another way to relieve your boredom, sadness, anxiety, or anger. Go for a brisk walk. Call an old friend. Meditate. Vent your frustrations in a journal. Addressing the emotional triggers behind your binges can help you thwart them. (See Session 5: Conquer Cravings and Tackle Emotional Eating.)

Avoid Opportunities for Mindless Eating
If you know you tend to overindulge while watching a movie or sporting event, eliminate food from the picture. Bypass the snack bar, and chew gum or sip on flavored water or a cup of tea instead. Steer clear of trigger foods by refusing to keep them in the house. Out of sight means out of mind—and out of your mouth!

Learn to Ride the Wave
If your efforts to distract yourself, avoid trigger foods, or other techniques don’t always work, you have another option: simply sit with the craving or urge to binge, without acting upon it. Acknowledge that this is a natural phenomenon, accept the discomfort of the feeling, and mentally step back from the urge until it passes. This technique is a way of practicing mindfulness, being aware of your moment-to-moment thoughts, emotions, and experiences, without judging them. Research has found that, with practice, mindfulness-based interventions can greatly help people curb binge eating and emotional eating. (For more techniques on how to resist cravings, refer to Session 5.)

Seek One-on-One Coaching
Talk to your coach about other options that can help, such as counseling, support groups, or the possibility of medication.
Commitment Contract

To kick a binge eating or overeating habit and keep my weight-loss efforts on track, I will take the following steps:

- I’ll eat three regularly scheduled meals and one or two snacks as needed, so I won’t get too hungry.

- I will try to manage my stress and find healthy ways to soothe my emotions.

- When I catch myself slipping into a binge, I will stop myself with positive encouragement and compassion, and get back on track with a healthier activity.

- I will steer clear of trigger foods and mindless eating occasions, so I can stay in control of my eating habits.

- Meanwhile, I’ll continue my other healthy habits to the best of my ability.

My signature: ______________________________