



Healthy & Resilient You

This Is Your Brain on Food

Unscrambling the truth behind healthier eating habits



Have you ever had a *kale* or *cake* dilemma? Both could be delicious, or not, based on your mood. One is clearly healthy and the other obviously not. One comes with a short burst of euphoria followed by a super-sized side of shame. The other with that *let's get this over with* feeling and a slow-burn helping of moral superiority.

For those of us who struggle with our weight—or healthier eating in general—the choice is a no-brainer. We know we should eat the kale. The kale is the sensible choice. Eating the kale often takes more willpower than we can muster, though, so *cake* it is!

But what if it's not about willpower?

Is Food Addiction a Thing?

Though not yet formally recognized by the medical community, a growing body of evidence supports the existence of food addiction by demonstrating that food consistently triggers known addiction characteristics like brain reward dysfunction, preoccupation, impaired control, tolerance/withdrawal, and social impairment.

The evidence suggests that certain foods—especially *hyper-* or *ultra-palatable foods* processed with specific combinations of fat, sugar,

sodium, and carbohydrates—may be just as addictive as drugs or alcohol.

Per the National Library of Medicine's review of related studies: "Though both behavioral and substance-related factors are implicated in the addictive process, symptoms appear to better fit criteria for substance use disorder than behavioral addiction."

In other words, the ongoing struggle with unhealthy eating habits is less about willpower and more about our body and brain chemistry. This understanding can be extremely helpful as we work to change our relationship with food.

Facing the Cake over Kale Consequences

Is our relationship with food really all that bad to begin with? Well, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as of March 2020, among U.S. adults:



73.6% are overweight, and



41.9% suffer from obesity


Numerous studies have established a direct correlation between diet, excess weight, and adverse health outcomes. Poor eating habits can lead to a range of chronic health conditions, including heart disease, diabetes, and certain cancers.


Beyond physical health, our relationship with food also significantly impacts mental and emotional wellbeing. Feelings of shame, guilt, and isolation are common among those who struggle with healthy eating.

These physical and emotional tolls can create a [vicious stress cycle](#) that's hard to break—particularly when addictive compulsions are involved.


Using Addiction Science to Change Our Relationships with Food


Given the similarities between unhealthy food consumption and substance use disorders, it follows that strategies used to better manage substance use can also help us improve our relationship with food. Here are some actionable tips:


 **Embrace Self Compassion** – Understand cravings or eating habits not as weaknesses or moral failings, but as hard-wired brain chemistry that's beyond your control. Forgive that occasional piece of cake, and be kind to yourself.


 **Reframe and Refocus** – Rather than fixating on weight loss and body shape, focus on making healthy eating choices. Food is food, it's not a value judgment, so try to view it as nourishment and not a source of shame or an emotional reward. Learn to eat to live vs. living to eat.

 **Customize a Sustainable Eating Plan** – Whether you're vegetarian, vegan, carnivore, or keto, make a lifestyle plan that will help motivate you for long-term success. Be sure to include healthy foods you enjoy. Shop and prep ahead, focusing on whole, unprocessed foods as much as possible.


 **Set Yourself up for Success** – Anything that you can't stop eating or makes you feel bad emotionally or physically is a trigger food. Limit your exposure to those foods. Empty them from your fridge and pantry. Make and rehearse a plan for politely saying, "No thank you," and walking away when you encounter trigger foods in social situations.

 **Find Joyful Distractions** – When craving unhealthy food, engage in alternative activities that bring you joy to refocus your mind until the urge passes. Walk, dance, craft, make music, color, or do a crossword—whatever can hold your attention and give you a happiness bump without eating.

 **Keep Your Friends Close** – Substance use disorders thrive in isolation, so do what you can to maintain social connections. Include others in the above-mentioned joyful distractions. Invite like-minded friends to join your healthy eating journey and share compassion, successes, and accountability.

 **Seek Professional Help** – Consider nutritional coaching for healthy eating guidance, counseling for deeper emotional struggles with food or self-image, and medical consultations for diagnosis and treatment of related or underlying conditions, including medication when warranted.

BONUS TIP

 Check out the mindful eating and healthy habit-building guided mindfulness programs from eM Life. They're included, free, with your Concern membership through our digital platform.

By recognizing the complex relationship between our brain chemistry and food, we can begin to approach our eating habits compassionately and effectively. Remember, it's not just about what we eat, but also about how and why.

For customized tools and resources, visit Concern's Digital Platform by logging in to employees.concernhealth.com, and selecting the "Get Services" button in the upper right menu.

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If you find your level of stress is impacting your wellbeing, you can contact us for additional help and support.

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