

# WHAT SORT OF EATER ARE YOU?



BY MARK BIDDISS, PHD

# What Sort of Eater Are You?

(Extract from the book: *‘Why Losing Weight is Hard to Do – Why You Eat the Way You Do’*)

By Mark Biddiss (a.k.a. “Dr Mark”)

Okay: before you tuck-in to the meat of this chapter, let’s start with a sort of quiz to see if we can get an idea of what sort of “eater” you are, as this can actually be really useful in helping you to control your weight.

I want you to read through the following list of twenty interrelated statements which may or may not be generally true for you, more or less, to a greater or lesser extent. As you read through each statement, I want you to be as brutally honest with yourself as you possibly can. For each statement make a note of whether it is for you generally, more or less, more often than not:

**a) true**, or **“trueish”** (that is, *generally true, more or less, more often than not*); or

**b) false**, or **“falsish”** (that is, *generally false, more or less, more often than not*);

or, if you want to be really pedantic about it, I suppose you could include a third option which might apply to some sort of metabolically-psychologically complex, confused, conflicted, contradictory and generally mixed-up odd-balls of some sort much of the time:

**c) neither “true/truish” or “false/falsish”**; a bit of both really, depending on this or that.

This is imprecise science, remember, not least because most of us can be rather complex, confused, conflicted, contradictory and mixed-up creatures for at least some of the time, if not a lot of the time (I know I can be!), for all sorts of reasons.

Anyway, off we go...

1. You have tended to be overweight through much of your adult life, if not for longer, especially in more recent times, or certainly would be if you didn’t carefully control your eating.
2. You tend to have food on you mind quite a lot of the time, almost obsessively sometimes. You may even psychologically, and even physically, drool over cookery programmes on TV and slobber over “food porn” in glossy magazines.
3. You are more likely to eat too quickly, sometimes wolfing down your over-sized bites so fast, with minimal mastication (that’s “chewing” to you and me), as if your life depended on it or as if you are in training for an “*eat as fast as you can*” race.
4. You tend to find it difficult to eat *only* when you feel hungry, assuming you can actually recognise when you are genuinely hungry, that is. In other words, you often “feel like” eating even when you’re not hungry.
5. You have a strong tendency to eat just for the pure joy and simple pleasure of it – called “hedonic eating” – regardless of whether you actually feel hungry or not.
6. You sometimes can’t *easily* tell the difference between when you feel genuine “*metabolic hunger*” (i.e. your body needs nutrients) or when you just “fancy” something to eat for the pure joy and simple pleasure of it (called “*hedonic hunger*”).
7. You do a bit of binge-eating now and again, if not quite a lot.
8. If it’s one of your *habitual* or *regular* meal times, you tend to eat mostly or purely out of habit, regardless of whether or not you feel hungry or even particularly fancy the food. This may even apply to all your regular daily Hobbit-like meals – breakfast, second breakfast, brunch, lunch, afternoon tea, early evening meal, late supper and/or a habitual pre-bedtime snack.
9. When you have a meal that offers several courses, such as a restaurant meal, you’ll almost always opt for that third or even fourth course, regardless of how stuffed to the gills you already feel after the main course. “Just one more wafer-thin mint ...”

10. You almost always eat your plates and bowls totally clean, perhaps even using a piece of bread (or your tongue) to mop things up; saving on washing-up, you say.
11. You tend to really enjoy thinking about all those lovely yummy things you will eat later in the day.
12. You tend to eat or “overeate” when feeling emotionally up *or* down, when celebrating *or* feeling bad.
13. In such emotionally aroused states, you’ll more often than not reach for the classic “feel good” or so-called “comfort” foods, which usually contain loads of fat and sugar, such as chocolate, cake, biscuits, ice cream and cheese, to name just a few (though your particular “comfort foods” may be different).
14. You’ve tended to be “on a diet” on and off throughout your life – you’re likely to be a classic “yo-yo” dieter to a certain extent.
15. When you are on one of your regular diets, if you eat one too many more biscuits, chocolates or scoops of ice cream than you originally intended as “just a little treat”, you more often than not think to yourself words to the effect of, “Oh, what the Hell”, and proceed to polish off the rest, likely adopting an “all-or-nothing” mind-set that you’re either totally on your diet or totally off it.
16. You are quite good at feeling guilt and shame for eating too much when you know you shouldn’t. This is usually *after* the gorging event, though you strangely rarely feel guilty or shamed enough to succeed at doing something effective about it later on.
17. You tend to be more vulnerable to overeating in response to advertising. For instance, you tend to be a real sucker for the “*Buy-One-Get-One-Free*” or “*Three-For-The-Price-Of-Two*” special offers in supermarkets – especially for cakes, biscuits, sweets and processed junk food generally – as well as for the “super-sizing” offers in fast food and takeaway restaurants; it’s almost always a “large chips”, “large milkshake”, “large latte”, etc.
18. At “*All-You-Can-Eat*” buffet restaurants, you have a tendency – an amazing knack even – of skilfully piling your plates to the very limits of what the laws of mechanics, gravity and structural engineering will allow; and you almost always go up for seconds, and even for thirds if there’s any food left. And you almost *never* miss the dessert option either.
19. If breakfast is included in the price of a hotel stay, you tend to have a full, multi-course breakfast with all the trimmings, whether you are hungry for it or not, and even if you always only have a bowl of cereal or a couple of slices of toast when at home. Your usual reason to yourself is something along the lines of, “*I’ve paid for this so I’m jolly well going to eat it.*” Though if you’re a banker or a lawyer you use this same reasoning regardless of your usual eating habits.
20. You are at a high risk of giving in to temptation when faced with any eating-related situation where conscious or unconscious restraint or control of your eating urges is needed, such as at parties, conferences and other social gatherings where food is provided, especially *free* food.

All done?

If you thought that the vast majority or even all of the twenty statements were generally: a) “*true/truish*” about you, then you are probably what is technically known as a “*restrained*” or “*controlled*” eater, often referred to these days, especially in more informal conversation, as an “*emotional*” eater.

On the other hand, if you thought that the vast majority or even all of the twenty statements were generally: b) “*false/falsish*” about you, then you are probably what is technically known as an “*unrestrained*” or “*uncontrolled*” eater, often referred to these days, especially in more informal conversation, as an “*intuitive*” eater.

If you thought that the vast majority or even all of the statements were generally: c) neither “*true/truish*” or “*false/falsish*” about you, then you are, as I said earlier, probably some sort of metabolically-psychologically complex, confused, conflicted, contradictory and generally mixed-up odd-balls of some sort much of the time.

But interesting aye?

## The Good News and the Bad News

And now I have some good news and some bad news for you. Being a huge fan of delayed gratification (since growing up into a mature adult, at least), here's the bad news first: if you did turn out to be an "emotional eater" (a.k.a. "restrained eater" or "controlled eater", remember), then any pill, potion, lotion, "mind hack" or surgical procedure that aims to *only reduce your appetite* or "*metabolic hunger*" most probably won't be much good for stopping you eating too much, not least because you don't really eat because you're metabolically hungry, but more due to *emotional* cues, which is why you're called an "emotional eater".

Want the good news now? Many of the cognitive and behavioural tips, tools and techniques in my "Diet Tricks" book most probably will help you, regardless of what sort of eater you are: "emotional", "intuitive" or even a weirdo messed-up mixture of the two.

## Some Background Personal History to All of This

To get a good idea of how I might go about losing my excess fatty weight, and keeping it off, it seemed to me that it would be a good idea if I could learn as much as possible about how I became fat in the first place. What struck me as an obvious place to start was to work out what drove me to eat in the way I did to get so fat; put another way, what sort of "eater" was I or am I?

When I went to university many moons ago to read for my science degree, I attended a course called "General Introduction to Psychology". I think it was this course that first ignited my passion for the cognitive and behavioural sciences. Part of the course looked at motivation, and, in particular, motivation to do with eating. This is when I learned that I was what psychologists call a *restrained* or *controlled* eater (or what I will call an "*emotional eater*" hence forth). That sounds rather encouraging, right? Well, no, not necessarily as it happens, particularly for us fatties; the "emotional" label is a clue. And the chances are, by the way, if you're fat or worse, and have been for some time, and looking for some ideas from me on how to lose some of your excess weight, then you're almost certainly an "emotional eater" as well.

How do I know this? Well, for a start, as many of us fat dieters know from personal experience and grief, some people stay overweight and obese because they go on binges immediately after they attempt to go on a diet, but give up very quickly. This happened to me quite a few times over the years. For instance, I remember on more than one occasion giving up and failing miserably literally less than a week after I'd started a diet. Worse, I'd end up overeating so much over the next few days that I eventually munched through even more calories than I would have had I not dieted at all. As you can probably guess, I inevitably ended up being even fatter still, and even more depressed about my weight than I was before. Sound familiar, anyone? Since my diet required a *conscious restraint* or *control* of overeating on my part, it's pretty clear that the breakdown of this restraint or control – usually emotionally-driven - was a major factor in my greater food intake after I gave up my diet. You can probably guess now where the label of *restrained* or *controlled* or *emotional* eater has come from.

## Emotional and Intuitive Eaters

To get a better idea of the role of conscious restraint or control in our eating and dieting habits, psychologists tell us that almost everyone – be they thin, average, a bit “stout”, or Sumo-wobbly obese – can be put into two main categories:

1. People who consciously have to restrain or control their eating and
2. People who do not

People who fall into category 1 are technically known as *restrained eaters* (or sometimes as *controlled eaters*), or, as alluded to earlier, often more informally these days as “*emotional eaters*”. So I’ll mostly use this more informal term of “emotional eater” from now on when talking about *restrained* or *controlled* eaters.

On the other hand, people who fall into category 2 are technically known as *unrestrained eaters* (or *uncontrolled eaters*) or, as also alluded to earlier, often more informally these days as “*intuitive eaters*”. So I’ll mostly use this more informal term of “intuitive eater” from now on when talking about unrestrained or uncontrolled eaters. And if it’s not obvious, unrestrained, uncontrolled or intuitive eaters are called this because they don’t have to consciously restrain or control their eating as such; they rather just “intuit” when they’ve had enough for their body’s metabolic needs, and usually no more.

Evidently, I am the former (i.e. an emotional, restrained or controlled eater), and probably you are, too, especially if you’ve been fat for some time. Just to be clear, and as a *general rule*, emotional eaters usually have to *control* or *restrain* their often pleasure-seeking, emotionally-driven eating habits through willpower, while intuitive eaters rely more on “intuiting” their bodies’ metabolic cues to tell them if they need nutrients, so feel hungry or not, and so whether to eat or not. In addition, regardless of their actual weight, the eating behaviour of emotional eaters like me is rather closer to that of obese individuals than it is to that of intuitive eaters; you’ll see what I mean by this in a minute.

## Are You An Emotional Eater?

Here’s the characteristic tendencies of emotional eaters (a.k.a. *restrained* or *controlled* eaters):

- Emotional eaters tend to be overweight to some extent, or at least are more likely to be overweight than the enviable intuitive eaters. This is because emotional eaters tend to overeat a lot of the time, or are prone to carrying more body fat than they really need to if they’re not careful with their eating. That said, emotional eaters do come in all shapes and sizes. So although an emotional eater may not be overweight, an overweight person is more likely to be an emotional eater than an intuitive eater, assuming they’re fat because they simply eat too much for their body’s needs.
- Emotional eaters tend to have food on their mind a lot of the time, almost obsessively sometimes. You’ll not be surprised to catch some of the more seriously afflicted drooling over cookery programmes on TV and slobbering over “food porn” in glossy magazines.
- Emotional eaters are more likely to eat too quickly, usually more quickly than intuitive eaters, sometimes wolfing down their over-sized bites so fast, with minimal mastication (that’s ‘chewing’ to you and me), as if their life depended on it or as if they are in training for an ‘*Eat As Fast As You Can*’ race. They sometimes even shovel more forkful’s or spoonful’s of food into their mouths even before they’ve completed swallowed the last mouth full. It’s sometimes as if they are more focussed solely on

filling their stomach, than on the texture, taste, aroma and overall flavour of each delightful mouth full of food.

- Emotional eaters tend to find it difficult to eat *only* when they feel hungry, assuming they can actually recognise when they are genuinely hungry, that is (many can't).
- Many emotional eaters can't *easily* tell the difference between when they feel genuine "metabolic hunger" (i.e. their body needs nutrients) or when they just "fancy" something to eat for the pure joy and simple pleasure of it (called "hedonic hunger"). That's why those so-called "diet experts" of popular diet books who tell you to only eat when you're hungry are, shall we say politely, ill-informed.
- So, emotional eaters have a strong tendency to eat just for the pure joy and simple pleasure of it – hedonic eating – regardless of whether they actually feel hungry or not.
- Emotional eaters are far more likely than intuitive eaters to develop binge-eating habits.
- If it's one of their regular meal times, emotional eaters tend to eat mostly or purely out of habit, regardless of whether they feel hungry or even fancy the food. This applies to all their meals – breakfast, second breakfast, brunch, lunch, afternoon tea, early evening meal, late supper and/or a habitual pre-bedtime snack.
- When emotional eaters have a meal that offers several courses, they'll almost always opt for that third or even fourth course, regardless of how stuffed to the gills they already feel. They will eat almost to the point of nausea, if not vomiting. Just one more wafer-thin mint ...
- Emotional eaters almost always eat their plates and bowls totally clean, even using a piece of bread to mop things up; saving on washing-up, they say.
- Emotional eaters tend to really enjoy thinking about all those lovely yummy things they will eat later in the day.
- Emotional eaters tend to overeat when feeling emotionally up *or* down, when celebrating *or* feeling bad.
- In such emotionally aroused states, emotional eaters more often than not reach for the classic "feel good" or so-called "comfort" foods, which usually contain loads of fat and sugar, such as chocolate, cake, biscuits, ice cream and cheese, to name just a few (though your particular "comfort foods" may be different).
- Emotional eaters tend to diet on and off throughout their lives – many of them being classic "yo-yo" dieters.
- When emotional eaters are on one of their regular diets, if they eat one too many more biscuits, chocolates or scoops of ice cream than they originally intended as "just a little treat", they more often than not think to themselves, "Oh, what the Hell", and proceed to polish off the rest, adopting an "all-or-nothing" mind-set that they're either totally on their diet or totally off it.
- Emotional eaters are quite good at feeling guilt and shame for eating too much when they know they shouldn't. This is usually *after* the gorging event, though they strangely rarely feel guilty or shamed enough to succeed at doing something effective about it later on.
- Emotional eaters tend to be more vulnerable to overeating in response to advertising. They tend to be real suckers for the "buy-one-get-one-free" or "three-for-the-price-of-two" special offers in supermarkets – especially for cakes, biscuits, sweets and junk food generally – as well as for the "super-sizing" offers in fast food and takeaway restaurants; it's almost always a "large chips", "large milkshake", "large latte", etc.
- At "all-you-can-eat" buffet restaurants, emotional eaters have a tendency – an amazing knack even – of skilfully piling their plates to the very limits of what the laws of mechanics, gravity and structural engineering will allow; and they almost always go up for seconds, and even for thirds if there's any food left. And they almost *never* miss the dessert option either.
- If breakfast is included in the price of a hotel stay, emotional eaters tend to have a full, multi-course breakfast with all the trimmings, whether they are hungry for it or not, and even if they always only

have a bowl of cereal or a couple of slices of toast when at home. Their usual reason to themselves is along the lines of, “I’ve paid for this so I’m jolly well going to eat it.” Though bankers and lawyers use this same reasoning whether they are emotional eaters or not.

- Emotional eaters are at a distinct disadvantage and risk of giving in to temptation when faced with any eating-related situation where conscious or unconscious restraint or control of their eating urges is needed, such as at parties, conferences or other social events where food provided, especially *free* food. This is especially serious for those massively obese emotional eaters who need to lose fat for health reasons, or for when they need to lose weight and perhaps have “nil-by-mouth” in preparation for surgery.

You’ll probably recognise these characteristic traits or eating *tendencies* from those in the little quiz you did at the start.

I freely confess that pretty much everything I’ve listed above applies to me to a greater or lesser extent, whether I act on it or not. In other words, I have all those eating *tendencies*, so I’m pretty clearly an emotional eater. The same will apply to you, too, if you have most or all of the same tendencies.

It turns out too that scientists reckon that the majority of overweight and obese people are in this “emotional eater” category of eaters as well, especially those who have been chunky for a long time. So welcome to our huge tribe if this applies to you!

## Are You an Intuitive Eater?

Now what about the intuitive eaters (a.k.a. *unrestrained* or *uncontrolled* eaters), I hear you ask mournfully? Grudgingly, even? Well, some might argue that we’re not really interested in them here, of course. But are we? Well, believe it or not, and strange as it may seem, there are some studies which show that “acting as if” you’re an intuitive eater can actually help you to lose weight. We can do this by at least trying to mimic their thinking and behaviours. So, looking at how intuitive eaters think and behave at least gives you something to aim at if, like me, you naturally behave more like an emotional eater.

Basically, and as you might have guessed for yourself, in some ways intuitive eaters think and behave essentially the opposite to the poor emotional eaters.

So here’s the characteristic tendencies of intuitive eaters (a.k.a. *unrestrained* or *uncontrolled* eaters):

- Intuitive eaters tend *not* to be overweight – or at least are less likely to be so than emotional eaters – though if they are overweight they probably don’t care much about it one way or the other.
- Intuitive eaters tend to spend less time thinking about food than emotional eaters, or at least in the same obsessive way, because they have what might be described as a healthier attitude to food; certainly not obsessive in a negative way.
- Intuitive eaters may well truly love food – be real “foodies” in fact – but are content with “sensible” size portions and are not prone to over-eating in any given meal.
- Intuitive eaters almost always recognise and obey their body’s signals for when they are hungry, which is when they like to eat, and when they are satisfied, which is when they stop, even leaving some food on the plate if they have had enough.
- In a multi-course meal, intuitive eaters probably won’t bother with the dessert if they feel full by then. If they do have a dessert they won’t feel depressed or guilty about it afterwards.

- Intuitive eaters won't eat much or any of a meal if they don't feel hungry for it, even at their regular meal times, unless they think it's healthy to do so.
- When intuitive eaters fancy a treat like a biscuit or chocolate or some ice cream, they rarely eat too much, often being content with just one or two biscuits, just one or two bits of chocolate, or just two or three scoops of ice cream, or sometimes even just one scoop!
- If intuitive eaters do go for emotional eating and comfort foods, it tends to be when they're feeling a little down emotionally, though even then they don't usually over-do it.
- On the rare occasions intuitive eaters eat too much, such as during the Thanksgiving, Christmas or New Year culinary-heavy festivities, they don't usually feel any meaningful guilt and shame – those words are usually not even in their eating vocabulary.
- There are some intuitive eaters who find eating some meals so much of a chore and waste of time, that they would, if given half the chance, rather pop some sci-fi, space-age “food pill” than eat proper food for the rest of their lives. And in case you think I'm totally exaggerating about this last tendency, in 2017, I think it was, some enterprising individual released a “nutrient drink” (I forget the name) which, he said, contains absolutely all the nutrients your body needs, and it's all you need to consume; so no more wasting time with that boring “meal” business. I bet he doesn't sell very many to us emotional eaters! Actually, I don't know if this is true, but my son told me recently that he'd read somewhere that the manufacturer of this nutrient drink offered a large financial reward to anyone who would live solely on it for an entire year without consuming any other food product. At the time of writing (2020), I understand that nobody has thus far gone for more than a few weeks or months without giving-in. No surprise, really, if true.

Anyway, you should be able to work out from the above list of tendencies that for those enviable intuitive eaters, food and eating simply aren't as potentially unhealthy significant to them as they are for us poor emotional eaters. That's why we'd do well to copy their thinking and behaviours habitually, practicing daily, ever hopeful that some of it might just rub off and stick to us, and so become our habitual eating pattern. Hope does spring ever eternal, after all.

## Some Concluding Comments

Just one last thing I'd like to say here: the characteristic tendencies I've just described for emotional and intuitive eaters are just that: *tendencies*. In other words, whether you are an emotional eater or an intuitive eater, it doesn't necessarily mean that you will show *all* the characteristic tendencies I listed, or to the same extent. But whatever sort of eater you are, the chances are you did recognise yourself in the descriptions somewhere, and – if you are currently overweight and looking for weight-loss ideas – you most likely recognised yourself in the list for the emotional eaters.

Joking aside, I say again that us probably unhealthy emotional eaters would do well to “act like” the healthier intuitive eaters as often as we can, copying as best we can at least some of their healthy eating habits and attitudes, however grudgingly (though maybe not the crazy nutrient drink I mentioned, unless you're really desperate). After all, as I've already suggested, there is some good scientific evidence to support the idea that if we “act as if” something is true for us, it can become true for us sooner or later, especially if we're talking about adopting healthy behaviours which could, in time, become healthy habits.