



EPISODE 81:

Breaking the
Emotional Eating
Cycle

I'm Rachael Collins at The Joyful You Podcast.

This is episode 81, Breaking the Emotional Eating Cycle.

You're listening to The Joyful You Podcast.

On this show, I talk all about the tools you need to cultivate a healthy relationship with food, your mind, and your life, so you can live well, feel well, and become your strongest, healthiest, happiest, most amazing self.

Do you ever feel like no matter how much you wanna eat healthier and get serious about losing weight, there's just something holding you back?

You vow to do better and to cut back and to stay on track, and this time you mean it, only to find yourself right back at square one, feeling like a failure, feeling like someone who lacks willpower.

If this is you, don't despair.

I can guarantee that the reason that this is happening is not because you're weak or even that you lack willpower.

The reason that you end up in this vicious cycle is because, dun, dun, dun, you have an emotional connection with food.

Now, most all of us have some sort of an emotional connection with food to one degree or another.

We celebrate with food.

We find pleasure with food.

But if you find yourself not being able to stay on track with the eating plan that you know is best for you, it is simply because you have created an emotional eating habit.

Now, the thing that I love about habits is that once we understand them, once we understand how they are created, we can, with a little practice, we can break them.

So today, I want to teach you about the emotional eating habit cycle, how it works, and then how to break it.

So with this cycle, the first thing that happens is you have a cue.

Now, this cue could be seeing food, it could be being around certain people, it could be feeling a certain emotion, such as stress or sadness, boredom.

Maybe you feel irritated, tired, frustrated, lonely.

Those are really common emotions that we feel.

It could be that you smell food, or food comes up on the TV, or food comes up in a conversation with your sister.

There are lots and lots of cues.

Now, the cue triggers a thought.

So maybe that thought is, this will taste so good, I deserve this, eating this always makes me feel better, I want this, I just need a little pick me up, I just need a little something sweet.

Maybe it's everyone else is eating this.

I never come to this restaurant.

I don't know if I'll ever be back again.

Or maybe it's been a long day, or even hallelujah, the kids are finally in bed.

Now remember, we are all emotional eaters at times, and it's fine until it's not.

When emotional eating gets out of hand, and it starts to take over, and starts to feel like you're out of control, and you can't stick to the plan that you want to be sticking to, then you know it's time to break up with it.

So, so far we have the cue that triggers a thought.

This all happens in a nanosecond.

We don't usually even pay attention to these two things.

What we usually do notice, though, is the urge that comes because of the thought.

Now, I think we all know when an urge is, it is that feeling of this intense desire to consume something, right?

We all know it.

So we have the cue that triggers a thought, and then the thought creates an urge.

Now, from that urge, we take action.

We go to the pantry.

We drive through the drive-thru.

We load up our plate, and we eat, which then leads to the next part of the emotional eating habit cycle, which is the reward.

Eating rewards our brain in the form of dopamine, and it is usually an extremely high amount of dopamine.

Now, dopamine, if you don't remember, is a feel-good chemical that our brain releases whenever we eat.

It is our brain rewarding us for doing something that is keeping us alive.

But the more flowery, sugary, high in refined carbs, processed, fried, and fatty the food is, the more dopamine our brain is going to release.

Now, this high level reward closes the feedback loop in our brain, and it creates a habit.

This habit is now locked in place.

The brain thinks it knows what we want, and without us even having to think about it, it will now automatically do it for us.

Thank you, brain.

We appreciate that, but we kind of don't.

So whenever we see the cue, we have this thought, which creates this urge, which then leads to the action of eating, and then we have the reward.

But we are not done, because we still have one more step left in the emotional eating habit cycle.

We all know what comes after the reward.

When we eat, we feel really good, and then minutes later, seconds later, hours later, maybe a day later, we're beating ourselves up.

We're criticizing ourselves for eating off plan and getting off track and blowing it yet again.

We start to feel guilty, and we are like, dang girl, you're so stupid.

Why did you do that?

You're just going to keep staying fat.

What is your problem?

We beat ourselves up like nobody's business.

The problem is that all of this self-criticism just creates more emotions.

And then those emotions act as cues that then trigger a thought, that create the urge, then we take action and we eat.

You get it, right?

This just keeps the cycle going and going and going.

And the more we repeat the cycle, the stronger the pattern gets, and the harder it is to break.

But there is good news.

It is not impossible.

It is not impossible to break the cycle.

So how do we do this?

How do we break the cycle?

Let's talk about that for a minute.

We break the cycle by learning a new habit.

We replace the old habit with a new habit.

And this works exactly the same way.

We have a cue that triggers a thought, that creates an urge, and then we take an action that is rewarded, and voila, a habit is born.

Now, we can't get rid of the cues.

Changing the thought is often difficult because the urge comes on so fast and just takes over everything.

It's all we can pay attention to because it's just so dang strong, but we can change our actions.

So we can use the urge as kind of a heads up to stop, pause, and have some awareness.

The second we feel the urge, we have a choice.

We get to decide if we eat or if we don't eat right now.

So many times we don't feel like we have a choice.

The urge feels so overpowering, like we don't have any control and that we will self-combust if we don't obey the habit and eat.

But I promise you, you have all the power.

You are 100% in control.

It is your choice.

You get to choose if you want to strengthen the emotional eating habit, and if you do, then keep answering that urge with food.

If you want to break the habit and create a new one, then instead of eating, you are going to choose to not eat right away and just notice the urge.

Now, I want you to notice that I said choose to not eat right away.

You can sit with the urge and respond to it in two ways.

One way is to resist and deprive yourself.

This sounds like, no, I'm not going to eat this.

No, I really, really want to though, but I'm not going to.

It's this little fight that we have back and forth with ourselves.

It's this white knuckling.

We're holding on so tight for dear life to not give in to this urge.

And it's tough to keep this fight going and to keep all of the energy that it takes to do this up.

It's almost like we have this angel on one shoulder and the devil on the other shoulder, and they're going back and forth, back and forth.

Eat it.

No.

Eat it.

No, I'm not going to.

Eat it.

It gets so exhausting, which just adds another emotion and starts the cycle going.

Eventually, we're so tired, we give in.

Now, the second way to sit with an urge is to simply acknowledge it.

Just acknowledge that you have an urge to eat.

So this kind of looks like this.

I think of it as talking to myself like I'm a small child.

I'm really kind, really loving, just super nice to myself.

And I'll say something like, oh, I see you want that donut.

Yes, it would be really good for a few seconds.

But you know, after we eat it, we're just going to feel sick.

We're going to feel guilty.

And we're probably going to feel some regret.

If we are going to eat it, we definitely don't want to bring any of that with us.

So if we do eat it, let's make sure that we really want it.

Let's make sure that we stay present with it, that we can actually sit and enjoy it and taste it, and we don't go unconscious just inhaling it.

We also might be fine without it.

You know, it is kind of greasy tasting.

Why don't we give it a minute while we go complete another task, and then maybe if we still want it, we'll eat it, or maybe we'll eat some of it.

Notice how I am acknowledging the urge.

I'm not resisting it.

I'm not white-knuckling it.

I'm not fighting with it.

I'm just noticing it.

I'm just talking to it.

I'm just giving us some options.

Now, the interesting thing about an urge is that it is just a chemical that is vibrating through our body.

And if we acknowledge it and we don't try to fight with it, it can do its job, and in about 90 seconds, somehow they've figured all this out, then that chemical is gone.

It's been metabolized into our body.

But if we tense up and try to resist it by using willpower, it just grows stronger and it lasts longer.

And that's why we don't feel like we have any control when we really do, just because it's so super strong and we keep it going for longer than 90 seconds.

So what we want to do is we want to replace the emotional eating habit with an emotional awareness habit.

That's what we're doing here.

When we don't fight it, when we're not trying to use willpower to resist it, and when we're just kind of noticing it and talking to it, just like I did, kind of like a small child, we're just kind and compassionate to ourselves.

And we're not necessarily, you know, telling ourselves, no, you can't have it, I really want it, but no, we're not going to eat it.

We're just like, maybe, maybe we'll have it, but maybe we don't really need it.

We just kind of have that conversation.

We're just kind of noticing the urge and talking to the urge and to ourselves a little bit.

We are creating an emotional awareness habit.

We've got the cue.

We've got the thought.

We've got the urge.

But now we're taking completely different action.

See how that works?

So we're going to create a different habit.

We can't get rid of the cues.

I wish, right?

I mean, sometimes we can.

We've all tried that before.

How many of us have all gone on a diet and we've completely cleaned out the fridge and the pantry of all of our temptation foods?

Only to have them somehow come back up into our lives, right?

We're always going to come into our temptation foods in some way or another.

We're going to see them on TV or hear about them on the radio or someone's going to bring them up or we're going to walk by and meet them all or someone's going to offer them to us at a party.

We can't run away from the cues.

So we're going to have the cues, which the thought and the urge, but we're going to choose to take a different action, which is going to create a different habit for us.

So then when the cue comes up, everything's going to start to change because our brain is like, oh, now I know that when we see this cue, we think this, we feel this, but then we do this.

Now the thing about an emotional awareness habit is that there isn't a huge built-in reward for allowing an urge.

Unfortunately, we don't get a huge hit of dopamine for allowing an urge.

I wish we did, but we don't.

So we have to create our own.

So let me give you some ideas of things that you can do that are going to create this reward for yourself.

You can put a sticker on a chart or a check mark on a chart.

You may want to put a bead or a penny or even a dollar if you really want to get crazy into a jar every time you allow an urge.

That is a great reward.

You can even go simpler and just over praise yourself.

Just over praise yourself.

When my second oldest son was little, he was so good at doing this.

He was his own best cheerleader.

He was always hyping himself up.

I remember one time we went bowling, and even when his ball would end up in the gutter, he would still jump up and down and clap for himself and say, Yay, yay, yay, you're doing such a good job.

Keep it up.

It was so cute.

That's what I want you to do for yourself.

Now, you don't need to publicly jump up and down and clap for yourself.

I mean, you can if you want to, but some situations, probably that will not be a good idea.

But mentally, do that for yourself.

Say that to yourself inside in your head.

Overpraise yourself whenever you sit with and allow an urge.

And that is going to rewire the habit because the brain pays attention to the reward.

The reward is what's going to lock in that loop and create a new habit.

Now, like I said, it's going to take some practice.

So just trust your journey, trust yourself.

You've got this.

You are 100% capable of breaking the emotional eating habit cycle and creating an emotional awareness habit.

All right, that's it for today.

Thank you so much for joining me, and I will see you for our next episode.

Wait, don't go.

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