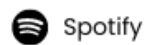




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Season 2, Episode 5: Feeding Feelings: How to Conquer Stress Eating

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DC: Hi everyone. Welcome back to another episode of the Healthier You Podcast. My name is DeOnna Clark and I'm one of the health educators here at Vanderbilt Health *Plus*. I'm excited to introduce Lisa Jackson, a licensed clinical social worker at Vanderbilt Weight Loss Center. Lisa, thank you so much for joining us today on the Healthier You Podcast. Would you mind just sharing with us a little bit about who you are and what you do here at Vanderbilt? LJ: Thank you for having this conversation with me today. In 2020, I began providing outpatient psychotherapy and counseling for people living with obesity. I help individuals in our clinic identify barriers to reaching their goals from a behavioral health perspective. Behavioral health generally refers to mental health and substance use disorders, life stressors and crises, and stress-related physical symptoms.

DC: We are just so excited to have you on the podcast today, and today's episode is particularly special, as we celebrate national nutritional month in March. So, we're diving into a unique and often overlooked aspect of nutrition, and that is stress eating. For many of us, food serves multiple roles beyond just nourishment. It's a source of comfort, a way to celebrate, and sometimes even a coping mechanism. I was really surprised to learn that research suggests about 75% of our eating is emotionally driven, whether we're feeling stressed, bored, or even happy, our emotions and stress levels can greatly influence our

eating habits. So today, we're going to dive into it and really talk about stress eating and just really break it down, because I have a feeling that looking at our nutrition from this angle will be helpful for many of us. Lisa, to kick off nutrition month, would you mind just sharing what inspired you to focus on stress eating in your practice?

LJ: I feel like I need to preface what I'm about to say with “spoiler alert!”, but I have come to recognize in my practice emotional eating can be utilized as an adaptive coping skill – essentially a positive way to deal with stress by actively addressing the problem or managing emotions in a productive manner.

DC: I think that's important to kind of frame our conversation today. So, with that, for those that are unfamiliar, would you mind just explaining what stress eating is and how it impacts our nutritional choices?

LJ: Sure. Stress is a physical or mental response to an external cause, such as having a lot of homework or having an illness. A stressor may be one-time or short-term occurrences, or it can happen repeatedly over a long time. You may feel stressed out about adverse events, such as a pandemic, a natural disaster, or an act of violence, or simply a life change. Everyone feels stress from time to time. When you find yourself triggered and are uncomfortable with your emotions like stress, you may access food as a distraction from distress. For example, you may have had a plan for dinner tonight, but the thought of prepping and cooking and then cleaning up is too much, so you alter your plans and you order out. This is called emotionally-driven eating.

DC: And I love how you really normalize that, right? Stress is a part of our experience. Everyone experiences stress, and we, for the most part, all have some relationship with food to some degree. With that, emotional eating often gets a bad rap. So, are there any ways that it can be a positive experience in terms of nutrition?

LJ: Absolutely. First, emotionally or emotionally-driven eating is normal. Food is pleasurable. As humans, we access happiness chemicals like dopamine and endorphins when we eat. In my practice, I acknowledge there are no magic wands when it comes to weight loss, but hopefully, our staff can help individuals identify a variety of tools to help them reach and maintain their goals. If you told me, “Lisa, I have a food or beverage in my toolbox,” I would say great! But if you clarified the only tool you reach in and access when you're stressed, bored, happy, or even sad is that food or beverage item, I would say, “Okay, this could quickly become imbalanced or maladaptive.” Examples of that would be graze eating, overeating, binge eating.

DC: I think it's so important to kind of acknowledge that we can have multiple tools, right? So, it's not saying that the tool of food is a bad tool.

LJ: Right.

DC: But it seems like you're highlighting that it is a tool that if we use healthily, then that can kind of support our nutrition even.

LJ: Correct.

DC: Well, you mentioned the diet-binge cycle, and we know that that's a common issue, so what does the latest research say about its effects on nutrition and overall health?

LJ: In thinking about the diet-binge cycle, this starts with restriction. It may be, "I'm only eating this specific type of food", or "I'm removing this entire food group from my diet", but this behavior leads to feelings of deprivation. This could occur immediately, or it could build over time. We know that when we have access to foods or beverages we have been restricting, and we approach them from a place of deprivation, we are at a higher risk of overeating or binge eating. This behavior is often followed by feelings of guilt: "I did something wrong"; or shame: "There's just something wrong with me." And sitting with these negative thoughts is uncomfortable, so we double down on the next diet, which in our diet culture is readily available, and the cycle continues. Diet culture teaches us that food is good or bad, or you and I are good or bad, based on how, when, or what we eat. These semantics matter, and they lead to unhelpful or distorted thinking patterns like all-or-nothing thinking. The good news is we can step outside of this diet-binge cycle. I would like our listeners to reframe the thought, "Food is good or bad" or "I was good or bad" to "What feels good or bad in my body." That is how we step outside of that diet-binge cycle.

DC: That is so powerful, and I'm so glad you gave us some good news that we don't have to be stuck in this cycle, because I'm sure that many of our listeners may relate to some of those elements, the all-or-nothing thinking, or just not feeling like they can get out of this cyclical pattern that they've had, so there's good news! There is a way to get outside of that cycle. And with that, many people find that stress and food cravings are closely connected. So, could you share with us your thoughts on this relationship and how it affects our nutritional choices?

LJ: Sure. Emotional hunger or a craving is for something specific. It comes on suddenly, as opposed to physical hunger, which typically comes on gradually and gets stronger over time. Cravings can be linked to feelings like boredom, sadness, loneliness, or stress. A craving is not satisfied by simply eating something, like when we experience physical hunger. It does not go away unless we eat or drink what we are craving. If we are craving high-fat, sugar, or salt items, we may even feel guilt or shame when we eat those items.

DC: Just the relationship between our stress and food cravings, because I'm sure many of us, even myself included, sometimes when you're having a stressful day, you might go for

that bag of chips or maybe that favorite sweet treat, and it seems like that craving has to be satisfied by what you're craving.

LJ: Absolutely.

DC: Well, how do you help clients reframe their relationship with food to focus on physical sensations, especially during stressful times?

LJ: Again, physical hunger comes on gradually, and it gets stronger over time. This typically occurs when you haven't eaten for several hours. Physical hunger causes headaches, stomach growling, feelings of weakness and irritability, or even difficulty concentrating. Physical hunger is satisfied by eating any type of food, and hunger cues should start to subside after you've eaten. This is a great way to differentiate between physical hunger and a craving, and also why I recommend eating a regular meal pattern that involves meals and snacks that you plan.

DC: That's such important education that you just shared with us to really actionably figure out, "How do I tell the difference"? Like, "How do I know this is a craving?" versus just "I really need to eat a healthy meal right now."

LJ: And these can occur together or apart. So, I can experience physical hunger on its own, or I can experience a craving at the same time. And so, if you said to me after this, "Lisa, hey, do you want to go get some lunch?" And I said, "Absolutely, I haven't eaten." And you mentioned a restaurant, and that's something that I had seen a commercial about or somewhere I wanted to go, absolutely now not only am I physically hungry, but I'm experiencing a craving. They're happening together. But, if you and I sat down at that restaurant, and at some point, I said to you, "Oh, I'm done, I can't eat another bite," and then you mention the dessert menu, and I sit up and say, "Absolutely, what can we get? You get this, I'll get this." That's an example, I just said out loud I was physically full, but at the mention of something, that craving is heightened. That's an example that cravings can occur completely on their own, but again, they're both something that's happening to us. It's not something we're doing.

DC: That's very insightful to learn and thank you for that real life application, because I'm sure many of us have been at that restaurant, and it's like the waiter comes by, and they ask you, "Hey, do you want dessert?" And, you know, maybe you do, but maybe it's kind of that almost like a trigger. But trigger doesn't have to mean positive or negative I'm hearing, it just seems like sometimes we can use that as a way to differentiate. And can you share with us just some practical strategies for managing cravings and distinguishing between true hunger and emotional eating.

LJ: So, what I would like to say is physical hunger and cravings are something we experience, they're not something we do. Emotional eating, on the other hand, is something I do. So, hunger happens to me. My response, eating when I'm experiencing emotion, that's something I do. So, cravings are typically loud. Instead of focusing on trying not to eat or drink specific items, I recommend utilizing a tool that turns the volume down on the craving, so you feel more in charge. If you can delay and distract yourself for 10 minutes when you notice a craving, the craving does not go away. That's the bad news. But the good news is, over the course of that 10 minutes the intensity or the volume of the craving decreases. At that point, you can decide if you still want to eat or drink that specific item. If you decide you are going to eat or drink, then if you feel more in charge, you can decide how much of that food or beverage you're going to eat or drink. It is not delay, distract, don't eat. That is not the goal. It's delay, distract, and then decide. Remember, as long as your 10-minute delay and distract does not harm you or anybody else, anything goes during this 10 minutes. The most common ideas I hear in my practice are: Complete a task or a chore, play a game or scroll on my phone, read, leave the environment where the craving occurred by going to check the mail or maybe walking your dog.

DC: So, it seems like just 10 minutes can really kind of empower us or give us our power back, it almost seems like, just to delay a little bit and then giving ourselves the power to say, "Hey, I can decide now." So, I'm hearing that the craving may not completely disappear, but by using the strategy that you just shared, you now put the power back in your hands to say, "Okay, I can make a decision."

LJ: Correct. Let's go back to the restaurant. If you and I were sitting there, I just got done telling you I was physically full, and then the dessert menu comes by or we're talking about it. This is where we could decide, whether or not we decide it together or in my own mind I kind of look down at my watch and say I need 10 minutes. Maybe we're in the middle of a conversation. We just tell the waiter to come back, and we're going to talk about it. So, as we are distracted by our conversation then I am turning that volume down. I need to get to that 10-minute mark. Maybe I get up and go to the restroom during this time, I come back. Now, when the waiter comes back, that volume is not as loud. I can decide yeah, I think we are going to have some dessert, but maybe this is something we could share, or maybe this is something that I don't really think I need right now, and we're going to come back, you and I are going to have a meal again, we can have this at another time, and I may decide I'm good, I don't need it. But either way, I'm more in charge. The craving isn't dictating what I do.

DC: Yeah. I'm just really taking this all in, because I think, yeah, this is going to be so powerful for us to really understand that, again, we do have the autonomy and the power to choose, and by using this strategy that you're sharing, even in a very practical situation, I'm

sure a listener today may be going to a restaurant maybe today or sometime this week, and now they can say, okay, maybe it's the appetizer, maybe it's the dessert, or maybe it's the entire meal. You're teaching us how we can kind of take our power back in those situations and not feel like we have to be ran by our stress eating or emotional eating.

LJ: Absolutely.

DC: With that, we'll kind of close with this. I'm sure there are many people listening right now who may or may not be struggling with stress eating, and so, what actionable steps or resources would you recommend to improve their nutritional habits?

LJ: If you're experiencing cravings and you are also stressed or an emotional eater, because remember, we said earlier, we clarified, cravings aren't something you're doing, they're a hunger, you're experiencing them. But if, again, you are also an emotional eater, I would suggest your 10-minute delay, distract, decide may need to be something pleasurable that helps you access those happiness chemicals we talked about earlier, including dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and endorphin. You should pay attention to your feelings when you're eating but also give yourself permission to eat sometimes simply because you're happy, sad, or bored. If you realize food and beverages are your primary coping strategy, it would be important to explore alternative ways you could access those happiness chemicals in addition to eating not instead of eating. So, here are some suggestions. Specifically, when we're talking about dopamine, this could be, like I said earlier, completing a task. So, if you had a delay, distract, decide, and it was just a craving, doing a chore may work. But if you also are stressed, if you are a to-do person, like me, and you have a list at home of things you want to accomplish, once you can mark that chore off the list, ooh, now you've gotten a dopamine hit. This could be celebrating little wins. This could be listening to music, another way we access dopamine. Serotonin, as you can see, the listeners can't see, but I'm in a beige box all day long, so if I can leave work and step out into the sunlight, I automatically get a hit of serotonin. If I am moving and walking, that would be an example of endorphins. But for me, if I am busy at work, and I haven't eating lunch today, which I would not encourage you to skip lunch, but sometimes that happens, and when that happens, if I'm driving home and my stress level is going up because of traffic, and then I walk in the front door, I am automatically going to go to whatever that food is that's easily accessible because I'm really hungry, but if I can take my 10-minute delay, distract, decide, and I take my dog for a walk, one, oxytocin, the love chemical, when she sees me pull out that leash, her face scrunches up, she's happy, I'm happy. We step outside, serotonin from the sunlight, endorphins from the walk. Being in nature, if it's not really, really cold like it is today, that can also be accessing serotonin, and the dopamine hit from completing the task. Now, I'm coming back into my house with those happiness chemicals on board. So now, I can access stimulus control like reading a label, counting out the portion. I'm still

going to have the chips and salsa, but I may not eat the entire bag because I took the time to turn the volume down. So, in those situations, again, playing with my dog, hugging your family, giving a compliment, oxytocin. Endorphins, if it's not taking that walk, it could just be watching a funny video on my phone. Laughter, we access endorphins that way. Essential oils, scent. So, another way to access endorphins, not just through exercise, but lighting a candle when I walk into my house. These are all ways that you can access happiness chemicals, again, in addition to food, not instead of food. I don't want anyone who's listening to take food out of their toolbox. I want them to think about other tools they have access to that they could reach in, in addition to the food.

DC: In addition to, not instead of.

LJ: Exactly.

DC: Such practical ways that we can look at this topic and even just experience this topic, even right after this episode. I mean, you gave us really just simple things that it seems like, you know, per your practice, your experience, you're telling us about the emotional part of it, but also the chemical part of it, and how it interacts with our brain, but you're really showing us and teaching us how doing things like taking a walk or hugging your family member, or watching that funny video on your phone, these are relatively accessible things that we can do day by day, I'm going to take home for myself.

LJ: Fantastic! Yeah. I think that's the biggest takeaway that I've had in working in my practice is that it doesn't have to be that all or nothing, that if we can find flexibility that pushes against that diet-binge cycle, that gives us the ability to step outside of it, to really focus on how we're feeling, and sometimes when we're feeling a certain way, it's going to be reaching for a food or beverage, but when we do that, we don't have to feel guilt or shame. We can say, "Oh great, this was a way I dealt with whatever I was feeling, but now that I've reached in and pulled that out, what else do I have?" And if we can reach in for those other tools, then we find that balance, I think we're on the right track.

DC: No doubt, no doubt. Well, your balanced perspective that you shared with us is such a gift, and so, I'm hopeful that our listeners can walk away from this conversation and really feel empowered to say, "Hey, I can take control of the stress eating, emotional eating, and really just improve my nutrition overall." So, Lisa, thank you so much again for joining us today. Your insights into stress eating were incredibly valuable, and I am hopeful that the Vanderbilt community, again, will walk away from this conversation feeling empowered that they can take charge of their stress and nutrition.

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