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GUIDE

Food Psychology Handbook

Why We Overeat and How to Break Patterns

SELF-PACED PDF COURSE

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Food Psychology Handbook

Why We Overeat and How to Break Patterns

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DISCLAIMER

This guide is for educational purposes only and is not medical advice. It does not diagnose, treat or replace care from a qualified health professional. Talk to your doctor before you change any treatment, medication or care plan, and get help promptly for any symptom that worries you.

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How to Use This Handbook

Most advice about overeating skips straight to rules: eat this, avoid that, try harder. This handbook starts somewhere else. It explains *why* you eat more than you meant to, in plain language, across every cause that matters: the hormones that control hunger and fullness, the reward system that makes some foods hard to stop, the environment that makes decisions before you do, the way modern food is built, stress, sleep, habit, and the diet rules that so often backfire. Once you can see which of these forces drive your own pattern, you can change the right thing instead of fighting all of them with willpower.

The second part of the handbook turns that understanding into a calm, practical plan. It is not a diet. There are no forbidden foods, no calorie targets and no “starting again on Monday.” The aim is a relationship with food that feels steady and conscious, where you eat what you choose, enjoy it, and stop without a struggle most of the time.

How the handbook is organized

Part	Chapters	What you get
Understanding	1 to 9	The eight drivers of overeating, one at a time: what is happening in your body and brain, and what it looks like in daily life
Changing	10	The Pattern-Breaking Plan: five steps and a 4-week schedule
Safety	11	When overeating needs more than self-help, and who to see
Reference	Appendix	Every driver and its main fix on one page

Each driver chapter follows the same shape: the mechanism in plain language, what to do about it in numbered steps, a short example, a brief exercise, common mistakes and key takeaways. The exercises here are deliberately short. The full tools (the pattern log, the trigger map and the 4-week plan) live in the companion workbook that comes with this handbook.

How to get the most from it

1. **Read Chapters 1 to 9 with your own pattern in mind.** As you read, notice which chapters make you think “that is exactly me.” Those are your main drivers.
2. **Start the Pattern Log in the workbook on day one.** A week of honest notes, kept while you read, will teach you more about your eating than any chapter.
3. **Do not try to fix everything at once.** Chapter 10 shows you how to choose one pattern and change it properly. Spreading effort across eight drivers is how good intentions fade by week two.
4. **Be curious, not critical.** You are studying a pattern, not grading yourself.

TIP

About the examples

The people in the example boxes are composites, written to show how the ideas work in real life. They are not real clients or testimonials.

CAUTION

Before you begin

This handbook is educational and is not a substitute for medical or psychological care. If you regularly eat very large amounts while feeling out of control, if you make up for eating by vomiting, using laxatives, fasting or exercising compulsively, or if you have diabetes, are pregnant, or take medication that affects appetite, talk to a doctor alongside reading this. Chapter 11 explains the warning signs and who to see. Do not stop or change prescribed medication without your doctor’s advice.

CHAPTER 1

Why Overeating Is Not a Character Flaw

01

If you have ever finished a bag of chips you did not particularly want, or eaten dinner so fast you barely noticed it, you may have told yourself a story about your lack of discipline. That story is understandable, and it is mostly wrong. Overeating is what happens when a body built for food scarcity lives in a world of constant, cheap, delicious food. It is a predictable result of several systems pulling in the same direction, not a sign that something is wrong with you.

Built for scarcity, living in abundance

For almost all of human history, the main food problem was getting enough. A brain that noticed food quickly, wanted energy-rich food strongly, and ate more when food was plentiful had a real survival advantage. Your brain still works that way. What changed is the world around it: food is now available within minutes, at any hour, in packages designed to be as appealing as possible, surrounded by advertising, delivery apps and social occasions that center on eating.

In that setting, eating more than you need does not require weakness. It only requires an ordinary brain doing what it evolved to do.

The eight drivers

Overeating rarely has a single cause. In most people it comes from a mix of eight drivers, each covered in its own chapter:

Driver	What it sounds like	Chapter
Body signals	“I was starving by the time I got home.”	2

Driver	What it sounds like	Chapter
Reward	“I wasn’t hungry, I just really wanted it.”	3
Environment	“It was there, so I ate it.”	4
The food itself	“It was gone before I noticed.”	5
Stress and emotions	“I needed something after the day I had.”	6
Sleep and fatigue	“I’m always snacking when I’m tired.”	7
Habit	“I don’t even remember deciding.”	8
Rules and guilt	“I’d already blown it, so I kept going.”	9

Most people find that two or three drivers explain most of their overeating. One person’s pattern is mainly long gaps between meals plus an evening TV habit. Another’s is stress at work plus a strict weekday diet that collapses every Friday. The fixes for those two people are completely different, which is why general advice so often fails.

Why willpower is the wrong tool

Willpower is real. You can decide not to eat something and follow through. But willpower works like a spotlight: it only helps where you are paying attention, at the moment you are paying attention. Most overeating happens outside that spotlight, when you are tired, distracted, stressed or simply running a routine you have repeated hundreds of times.

That is why the plan in this handbook relies on willpower as little as possible. Instead, it changes the conditions: when you eat, what is within reach, what you do after a hard day, how you respond to a slip. When the conditions change, the pattern changes, and you no longer need to win the same argument with yourself every evening.

> You do not need more discipline. You need to understand what is pulling you, and change the setting it pulls you in.

Common mistakes

- **Looking for one cause.** “It’s just stress” or “it’s just sugar” usually misses half the picture.
- **Treating every extra bite as a problem.** Eating past fullness at a celebration is normal human behavior. The aim is a pattern that feels steady, not perfect control.
- **Using shame as motivation.** It feels as if being hard on yourself should help. In practice it adds stress, one of the very drivers you are trying to calm.

EXERCISE

Your last three overeating moments

Think of three recent times you ate more than you meant to. For each one, write what happened, then tick the drivers that were present. You will often tick more than one.

Moment 1:

- [ ] Body signals
- [ ] Reward
- [ ] Environment
- [ ] The food itself
- [ ] Stress or emotions
- [ ] Sleep or fatigue
- [ ] Habit
- [ ] Rules or guilt

Moment 2:

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WORKBOOK

Food Psychology Handbook Workbook

Pattern Log, Trigger Map and 4-Week Plan

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PART 1

The Pattern Log

1

For seven days, write down every time you eat or drink something other than water. Change nothing yet: the aim is an honest picture of your normal week. A line takes about thirty seconds.

How to fill in each column:

- **Day and time:** for example “Tue 3:40 pm.”
- **Hunger before:** 0 is empty and shaky, 5 is neutral, 10 is painfully full.
- **Where and doing what:** “desk, emails,” “car,” “sofa, TV.”
- **Feeling:** one or two words: calm, tired, bored, stressed, happy, lonely.
- **What I ate:** a rough description is enough. No weighing, no calories.
- **More than I meant?** Yes or no.
- **Drivers:** the codes (B, R, E, F, S, T, H, G) for any “yes” line. You can add these in the evening.

At the end of the week, answer the questions on the page after the log sheets, then move on to Part 2.