

SCRIPT – PRINT – Take a Bite Out of Emotional Eating

Working From Home During a Pandemic Poses Food Challenges

Let's face it. Our world has been turned upside down thanks to COVID-19. Along with trying to stay healthy, this pandemic has cost many people their jobs, or forced them to work from home. And while being home during this uncertain time poses certain challenges, one of the biggest temptations is to overindulge on pizza, fast food, snacks, you name it. Why? There are several reasons but mostly because you can.

"They lack structure now," said Adam Schafer, OSF HealthCare registered dietitian. "At work you have certain times of the day you have this or that to do. When you are working at home it may not be nearly as structured. As a result you may be taking a lot more random breaks, you don't know how to fill in your time, and you may have less things to do at home. As a result the pantry is down the hall, you're going to go grab it and you end up eating more."

Emotional eating is basically people's reaction to any type of stress they're experiencing – it could be stress, it could be anxiety, it could be boredom, frustration. What they do in response with those emotions is they end up eating.

"Eating is our coping mechanism. It's something that helps calm us down in times of dire need," said Adam Schafer, OSF HealthCare registered dietitian. "If you are stressed, you want something to help calm you down as soon as possible. And a lot of people turn to food because they usually have a positive experience with food and they tend to gravitate to things they like, usually sweet or salty usually one or the other or sometimes both."

When people experience times of uncertainty, anxiety or stress, their bodies produce a steroid hormone, cortisol, which can increase a hunger sensation. According to one study, researchers believe the brain processes carbs and fats separately, so enjoying a food that's heavy in both may cause the craving, and the desire to keep making the wrong food choices.

"Certain food, sugary foods, release hormones in your brain that make you feel good," said Nathan Hamman, an OSF HealthCare manager of wellness services. "So if you're stressed out or depressed and you eat high sugar foods you're going to feel better for a short amount of time so it's helping but it's actually sabotaging our health in the long run so it's not a good thing to do. It'd be better to get up and go for a walk because we're still allowed to do that."

So what are the best ways to work productively from home without increasing your waistline? Dietitians have several recommendations. First, structure your day. Schedule your snack and lunch breaks between meetings or deadlines. Set up your work station as far away from the pantry as possible and drink lots of water. Meal prepping the night before is another smart idea.

"So, try not to have the food in the house in the first place," said Nathan Hamman, an OSF HealthCare manager of wellness services. "So the best you can do when you go to the grocery store or have your food delivered to your house, don't have junk food that you know is going to be triggered foods and try to fill up on vegetables."

The bottom line is this: during a tough time, it's okay to break away from your diet once in a while. Don't beat yourself up over that one candy bar or that slice of pizza. But if you do feel like you need help, check with your doctor and get a referral to meet with a dietitian or look online for a webinar that can help you get back on track.