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ACUPUNCTURE won't help heal your emotions, but it could reduce the physiological effects of stress.

According to Robert A. Schulman, M.D., a board member of the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture, "it helps some patients feel better instantly because it boosts levels of endorphins—the body's natural pain relievers." But be aware: Your health insurance may not cover it, and it costs \$60 to \$150 per session.

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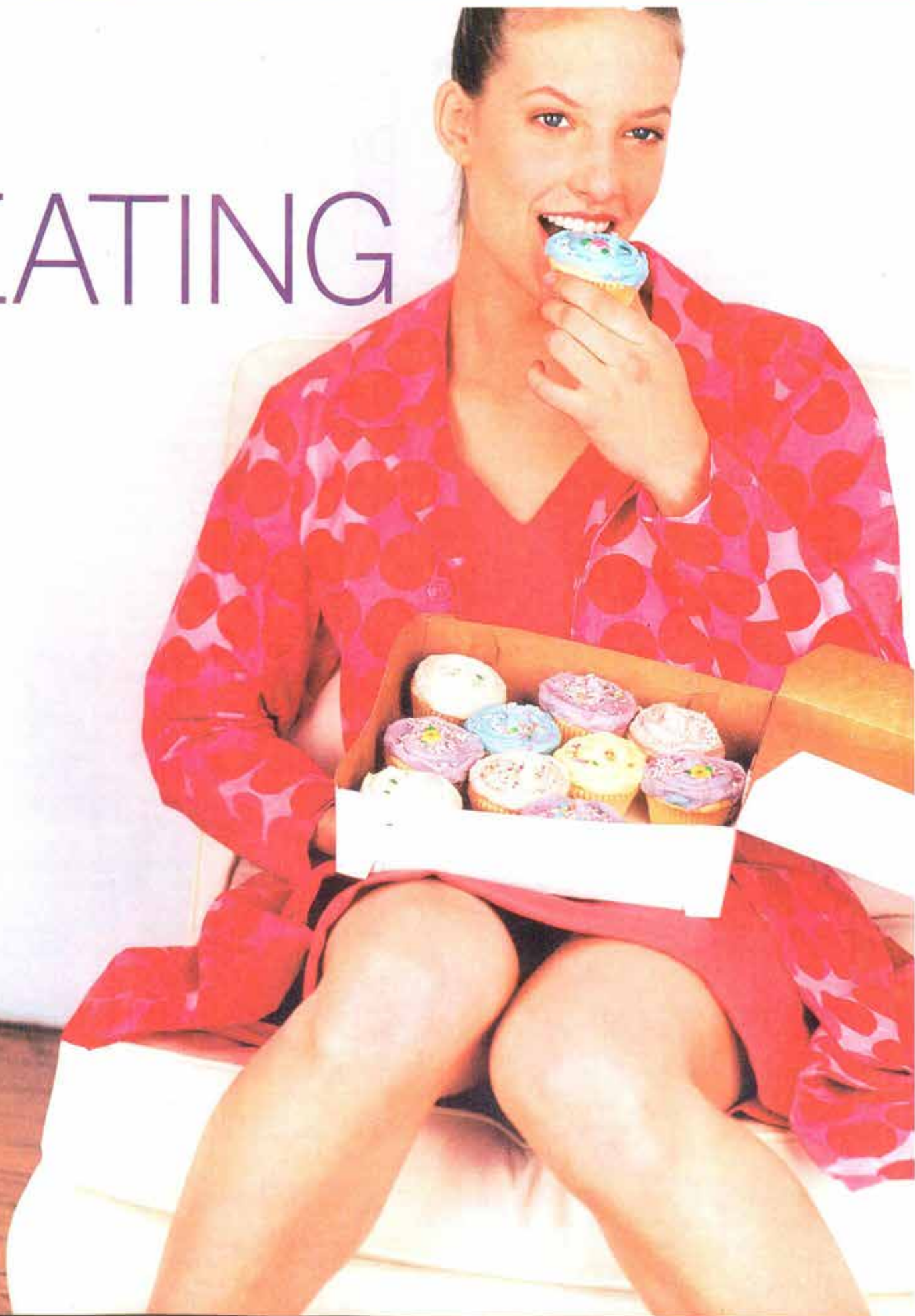
CONQUER EMOTIONALE

DO YOU BINGE WHEN YOU'RE BLUE? SEEKING COMFORT IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES WILL ONLY PACK ON THE POUNDS. DISCOVER HOW TO GET OFF THE FOOD/MOOD ROLLER COASTER—FOR GOOD.

BY JENNIFER NELSON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY HUBIE FROWEIN



EATING



YOU DON'T NEED A DEGREE IN

psychology to know that food helps us cope. Who hasn't been comforted by a slice of creamy cheesecake after a rotten day or made a beeline to the freezer for a post-breakup Ben & Jerry's binge? "Emotional eating has little to do with physical hunger and everything to do with psychological need," says Annette Annechild, Ph.D., a psychotherapist who specializes in food-related disorders. Whenever we use food as a crutch or to anesthetize ourselves, we're emotionally eating.

What is it about food that attracts us when we need comfort? For some, it's simply a matter of habit. Scientists know that our attachment to certain foods is closely connected to our personal memories. When you reach for a comforting bowl of chicken-noodle soup at the first sign of a cold, chances are you're really reaching for that soothing memory of Mom taking care of you when you were home sick from school.

For others, emotional eating is a matter of convenience. "We live in a glut of food," says Elizabeth Somer, R.D., author of *Food & Mood* (Owl Books, 1999). Eating to feel good is as easy as opening the fridge. Plus, we're raised to view food as a reward. When we get a big promotion or a raise, we celebrate with dinner at a fancy restaurant.

There's also a chemical connection. Certain foods, especially sweets, enhance the production of mood-boosting neurotransmitters in the brain. During periods of intense stress (a tough day at work, for instance), we frequently reach for these foods as a way to alleviate our anxiety. Premenstrual hormonal fluctuations can make us even more susceptible to cravings.

Emotional eating can become a fat-building roller coaster, but the damage isn't just physical. Relying on food to get you through difficult life situations actually poses more psychological danger; because food is only a temporary savior, your emotional needs never get met satisfactorily. It's a cycle that, pardon the pun, feeds itself.

It is possible to put the brakes on emotional eating, but as with any bad habit, it takes hard work and determination. FITNESS went to the experts to develop this three-step program.

1: DISCOVER WHAT'S EATING YOU

THE FIRST STEP TOWARD breaking your emotional bond with food is to identify the emotions you've been trying to escape. The best way to do this, says Elizabeth Carll, Ph.D., a

FAST-PACED DAYS AND BURNED-OUT NIGHTS REQUIRE TLC, NOT FOOD.

psychologist and certified eating-disorder therapist in Centerport, New York, is to keep a "wellness journal." In it, record everything from your sleep and eating habits to your innermost thoughts and feelings. Divide each page into three sections: Morning, Afternoon and Evening. This will help you keep track of the times when you're at your weakest—and your strongest—emotionally, so you'll know when your danger times are.

"Don't forget to include important clues, like where you ate (car, bedroom), whom you were with and what made you start—and stop—eating," says Cynthia Sass, R.D., a health educator at the University of South Florida. Doing this will help you identify your state of mind more specifically. For instance, instead of just writing, "Ate ice cream after phone call with Mom," include the gory details: You were alone in your bedroom, eating an *entire* pint of Chubby Hubby while mulling over that nasty comment your mother made about your boyfriend. This way, you'll be more able to identify what emotions were motivating you to polish off that pint. In this case, maybe you were feeling a little lonely, a lot angry and a touch sad that your mom still can't appreciate how good your boyfriend is to you. Over time, journal keeping may reap a bonus reward: A study at Maastricht University in the Netherlands found that when participants recorded what they ate in a journal, they consumed 26 percent fewer calories.

What if you forget to bring the journal with you when you leave for work? Give yourself a reminder by attaching your house keys to the rings of a loose-leaf notebook; when you leave your house, you must bring the book. Can't stomach the idea of toting around a notebook, recording every little detail in plain view? Visit healthetech.com; the site offers downloadable software programs for your Palm Pilot (DietLog, ExerLog and WeightLog) to help you keep track of your food and exercise habits.

PHOTO: JAMES H. HARRIS/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM; ILLUSTRATION: JAMES HARRIS/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

2: BREAK THE CHEMICAL CONNECTION

BEFORE YOU START dealing with the emotions behind the eating, you need to identify whether or not those emotions are caused—or worsened—by your own biochemistry. If you are feeling anxious or agitated, consider your stress level. Weepy? Maybe you're in the midst of PMS. Both situations involve complicated hormonal changes that could be setting into motion your desire to eat. Take another look in your wellness journal, paying particular attention to any clues that may indicate that you're stressed out from work, friends or family life. Or check a calendar to see if you're about to have your period. Whatever your chemical culprit, we've got an emotion solution to get you through it.

STRESS Researchers know that stress is one of the most common eating triggers. It boosts the production of cortisol, a hormone that facilitates the fight-or-flight response. A study from the University of California San Francisco Health Psychology Program found that participants with higher cortisol levels tended to eat more in stressful situations. And what did they eat? High-fat sweet foods—the dieter's downfall.

SOLUTION: According to a study done in the Netherlands, a diet rich in carbohydrates and low in protein can lower cortisol output—but bagels aren't the answer. Fast-paced days and burned-out nights require TLC and downtime, not food. Devote a few minutes each day to giving yourself a breather, no matter how busy you are. Step outside the office and take a walk around the block. Treat yourself to a manicure or buy yourself a new CD at the record store down the street. The point is: Do something—anything—that removes you from the rat race, even if it's only for a few minutes.

Don't forget that "exercise is the best coping mechanism available," says Kathleen Zelman, R.D., a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. The research proves her right. In a review of more than 100 studies on the subject, researchers at the University of Bristol in England concluded that physical exercise enhances mood and general well-being.

For the added relaxation benefit, choose exercise routines that calm and soothe rather than excite; yoga is a good example. A study at Lokmanya Tilak Municipal Medical College & General Hospital in Bombay found that yoga made stressed medical students feel less anxious, more relaxed and confident, better able to concentrate and less irritable. It also made them more optimistic about life in general—worth taking a yoga class once or twice a week for.

PMS Your period creates hormonal ups and down that could, studies say, lead you straight to the fridge. "Estrogen levels take a dive right before your period," says Alycia Lee, director of nutrition at the Ajune Center for Beauty Synergy in New York City. Trouble is, when estrogen drops, so do levels of the mood-boosting neurotransmitter serotonin, making us feel moody, irritable and more likely to binge.



Keeping a journal can help you cut calories.

ERIC HIRANG / GETTY IMAGES

SOLUTION: Eat some tofu. Soy foods contain phytoestrogens, compounds that may make up for lower estrogen levels.

Don't like tofu? Researchers at the University of Tennessee found that 1,200 to 1,600 milligrams of calcium daily can help alleviate the PMS blues. Take it in 500-milligram doses, three times a day, with food for best results. Your body needs magnesium and vitamin D in order to properly absorb the calcium, so look for a supplement that contains all three nutrients.

3: EXPRESS YOURSELF

IF YOU'RE NOT under a whole lot of stress and you're period's long gone, but you just can't shake that feeling that food will just, well, make you feel better, you need to look more closely at your emotional landscape. Two of the most common reasons women reach for food include anger and loneliness, according to a study completed at the University of Wurzburg in Germany. Sadness (or depression) can also cause emotional eating. Look back again at your

wellness journal and try to notice what you were feeling deep down when you started to eat. Were you angry? Lonely? Just plain bummed out? There's a cure for each, and it doesn't always involve food.

ANGER It was cited as the number one eating trigger for women in the Wurzburg study. No wonder: Anger resembles stress in terms of how the body reacts physiologically. Cortisol production increases, which means cravings for sweet, high-fat foods become more likely.

SOLUTION: First, take a few deep breaths when you find yourself feeling angry. Collect your thoughts and try to articulate them in a calm, coherent manner. Write them down in a diary, or compose a letter to the person who ticked you off (be as reckless as you need to be; you don't have to send it). Sometimes, just letting go of the emotion can release you from its hold.

If you crave some crunch, go for hard—but healthy—snacks, like carrot or celery sticks. The crunching will help you relieve the tension stored in your facial muscles, and you'll get a little satisfaction from knowing you're getting nutrients your body needs anyway.

NEW AGE SOLUTIONS

REDUCE STRESS AND ANXIETY—AND HELP ELIMINATE EMOTIONAL EATING—WITH THESE MODERN TECHNIQUES.

It's a fact: The more stressed-out you feel, the more you're likely to eat. These modern methods take the edge off a stressful day, so you'll be better equipped to resist the urge to eat.

RELAXATION THERAPY uses visual imagery, muscle relaxation and diaphragmatic breathing, three techniques that together work to reduce stress. All three can easily be learned in one or two sessions with a relaxation therapist. "Patients can then use it in the comfort of their own home when they need to destress without food," says psychologist Elizabeth Carll, Ph.D.

Visual imagery involves closing your eyes and imagining the most relaxing place you can think of—the beach, perhaps, or your grandmother's rose garden. Imagine every little detail until you can almost smell the ocean and hear the rustle of the breeze. Hold the vision for at least five minutes.

Muscle relaxation is methodically contracting and releasing various muscles in your body, moving from body part to body part.

Diaphragmatic breathing involves using your diaphragm, rather than your upper chest, to inhale. To do it, inhale slowly and deeply through your nose, pulling the air into your lungs by pushing your abdominal muscles away from your spine. Hold

for five seconds, then exhale through your nose. Some practitioners believe diaphragmatic breathing can reduce the risk of disease and boost energy levels, but the medical literature doesn't prove this; in any case, it's a great way to "take a breather."

HYPNOTHERAPY places patients in a mildly altered state while the therapist suggests ways to break the unhealthy eating cycle. It can help emotional eaters discover why they turn to food for comfort. To learn more, contact the American Board of Hypnotherapy at 800-872-9996.

ACUPUNCTURE won't help heal your emotions, but it could reduce the physiological effects of stress.

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Whatever you do, don't reach for sweets. It's a natural reaction to anger, since sugar boosts production of serotonin, which makes us feel better temporarily. But sugary foods also flood the bloodstream with glucose, which triggers the release of the hormone insulin. The result: Your blood-sugar levels momentarily spike, then suddenly drop. And when blood-sugar levels fall, so does serotonin, leaving you feeling worse than you did *before* you grabbed that pint of ice cream or glazed doughnut.

LONELINESS If you're spending all your evenings in front of the tube with a bag of chips, it's a good bet you're eating out of loneliness.

SOLUTION: Reach for the phone—instead of the fudge—and call a few friends. Get off the sofa and take a walk, visit a neighbor or see a movie. It doesn't really matter what you do, as long as you develop alternate activities to get through your emotional rough spots. The less lonely you feel, the less junk food you're likely to polish off.

Better yet, pair up with a friend and go to the gym. "Making a commitment to an exercise buddy really helps motivate you," says Zelman. It may help you feel less lonely as well.

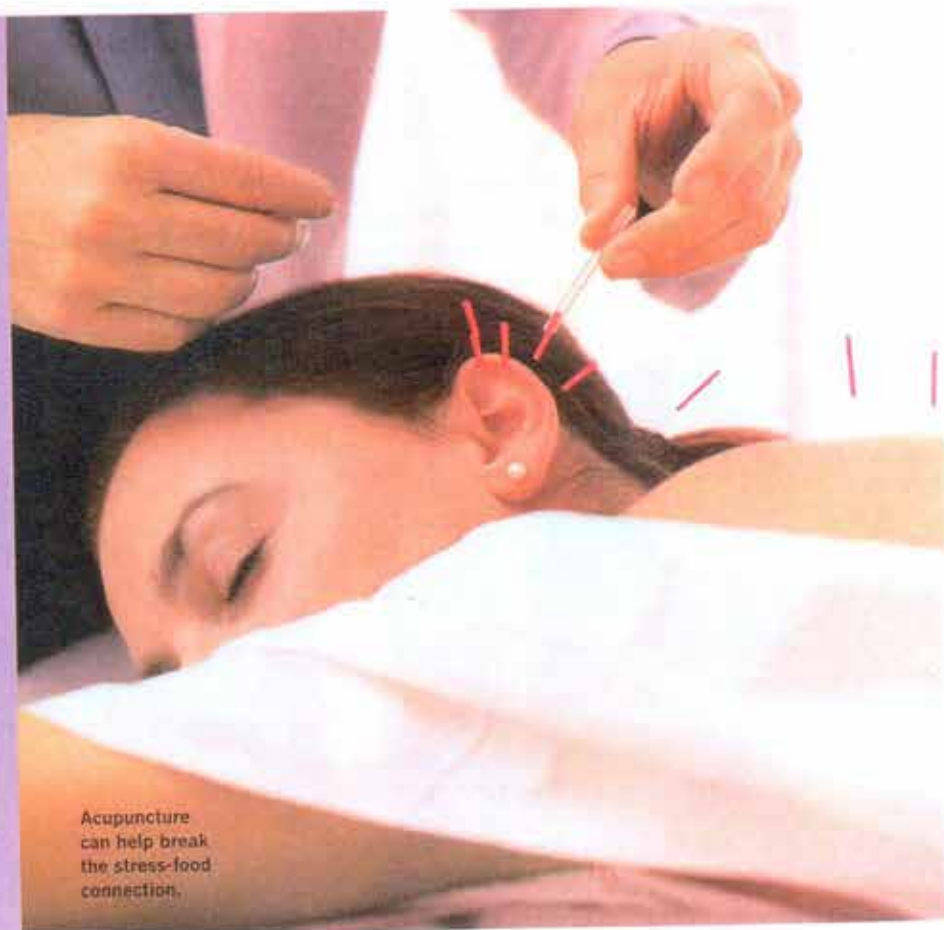
SADNESS Sadness (and depression) can also make us seek solace in the cookie jar. The reason comes down, again, to serotonin. Many of the most popular antidepressants on the market (like Prozac) alleviate depression by boosting the availability of serotonin in the brain.

SOLUTION: Stick to high-fiber complex carbohydrates, like whole grains and vegetables. These foods will keep serotonin production steady. Eating several small meals instead of three large ones will also help, says Zelman.

Resistance training can help reduce anxiety, according to an Arizona State University study. In fact, numerous studies indicate that exercise can decrease mild depression as effectively as psychotherapy. In one major study at Duke University, just 14 minutes of walking on a treadmill produced an 82 percent reduction in negative feelings. Try to fit in at least 30 minutes of push-ups, crunches or weight lifting, three or four times a week, plus about 20 to 30 minutes a day of some type of aerobic exercise, like walking, running or biking. Of course, if you think you're suffering from clinical depression, consult your doctor or seek out a qualified therapist. ■

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BIOFEEDBACK can help you learn to relax through the wonders of technology. Practitioners hook clients up to monitors that record pulse rate, respiration rate and blood pressure. They then use audiotapes and visual imagery while monitoring the body's response. Each session provides detailed information about what works to reduce the stress level of each individual, helping clients target their particular eating triggers. It's not cheap: Costs range from \$75 to \$100-plus per session, and it's not likely to be covered by your health plan.



Acupuncture can help break the stress-food connection.