If we’ve all gotten crazy about food, binge eating can feel the craziest. Binge Eating Disorder actually affects more people than any other eating disorder. Previous modules in this course addressed binge eating, as well as emotional overeating, and dealing with cravings (see Modules 9 through 11). You will use that material over and over again. This special edition module will refer to and use that material, while it focuses on ending chronic binging and bringing you to a more peaceful and steady place with food. Getting a grip on binging will allow you to manage your weight and other aspects of your eating more sanely.

To start with, I’ll repeat here the definition of a binge, and of Binge Eating Disorder:

*A binge is an episode of eating within a set time (for example, within any 2-hour period) an amount of food that is definitely larger than most people would eat in a similar time period under similar circumstances. (Overeating at a holiday meal, then, in this definition, does not constitute a binge, as most people do overeat in that situation). A binge also involves a sensed lack of control over eating during the episode—a feeling that one can’t stop eating or control what is eaten.*

Note that a true problem binge involves eating an objectively large amount of food, not just more than you’d planned to eat. It also involves feeling out-of-control, as if you can’t stop. Usually binge episodes cause at least some degree of guilt, worry, shame, or self-disgust afterward.
**Binge Eating Disorder** exists when binge episodes occur, on average, at least 2 days a week for six months. The binge episodes must cause a person distress, and they must also include at least three of these factors:
- eating much more rapidly than normal
- eating until uncomfortably full
- eating large amounts when not feeling physically hungry
- eating alone because of embarrassment over amount eaten
- feeling self-disgust, depression, or guilt after overeating

I will reemphasize here what I said in Module 11: if you meet criteria for Binge Eating Disorder, you may need to complete these modules with help. While not impossible, most people will find conquering this problem on their own extremely difficult. With help or without, though, this module can reinforce your efforts to heal and change.

The work of stopping binging for good involves two lines of approach. First, you will need to start doing the (usually uncomfortable) things that help to change, and eventually stop, the behavior. At the same time, you must also learn what feelings might be driving the behavior. This is because emotional eating, as well as confusion about cravings, almost always shows up when you examine binging. However, binging becomes a strongly ingrained habit that needs to be dismantled, even once you’ve identified any feelings that lie beneath.

**Regaining Control**

This module’s subtitle, “Regaining Sanity”, could also say “Regaining Peace of Mind”. Binging, even more than other forms of overeating, tends to cause much distress. Often people feel as if they’ll never get a grip on this behavior. The more they try, the more it seems to spin out of control again. This only intensifies the feelings of guilt, disgust, and shame. While it’s hard to stop, though, bringing the following pieces together will help you along:
Basics

First, to really set out to stop binging, you must gain a thorough awareness of when you binge. And you must be geared toward eating on a regular schedule, or at least aiming to be. It helps if you know which foods tend to set you off and to minimize, or temporarily eliminate, them from your diet. To get these background factors in place, I refer you back to Module 11. Then we’ll delve further into the two components I described earlier: stopping the behaviors, and understanding what drives them.

Stopping the behaviors

I’ve stated that part of your recovery will involve doing the “usually uncomfortable” things to help change and stop the behavior. Most bingers respond to that by saying “If I could stop, I would!” This is true, of course. Most people who struggle have tried to stop, becoming frustrated and disheartened when they can’t. Or, when they stop and then start all over again.

Knowing how difficult the challenge can be, though, you can start by trying (or trying again, if that’s the case) to use the coping skills outlined throughout the EatSanely course. Try your best to use them instead of eating when you’re heading toward a binge. They won’t necessarily work perfectly or all at once. The pull of the desire to eat can be very strong indeed. Going against your habit can be very uncomfortable. Eating may work much better at soothing or calming when you’re stressed.

Persist with new coping skills, however, and they’ll start to work better over time. To start with, you’re not looking for perfection. You’re looking for different, perhaps. A little better, maybe. Then you keep going. You note what works, when it works, and what’s happening when it doesn’t work.
What I’m referring to as “coping skills” include these and other previously outlined practices:

- Journaling (Module 6)
- Identifying and challenging unhelpful thoughts (Module 7)
- Sitting and delaying (Module 8)
- Mindfulness exercises (Module 8 and 13)
- Engaging in alternative activities (Module 9)
- Rating your hunger and eating, or not, accordingly (Module 10)
- Analyzing your binge episodes (Modules 11 and 15)
- Using affirmations (Module 7, 11 and others)
- Calling on someone for help (Module 16)

As you may have discovered if you’ve done any of these things, some will work better for you than others. That’s natural and to be expected. Some practices will suit your style and temperament and strengths better than others. You don’t have to engage in all of these activities to find relief. Ideally, you’ll find one or two or three practices that you can do and that you notice some difference with, whether large or small at first. These activities you can repeat, and repeat and repeat, and return to again and again when you get off track. They’ll better compete with your old behaviors in time. That’s how you’ll develop new habits and leanings in the end.

*Understanding what drives the behavior*

New ways of coping with urges to eat, new things to do instead of eating: all this becomes easier as you identify and name what drives you to binge in the first place.
You do it because you’re stressed. You do it because you’re lonely. You do it because you’re anxious, you can’t sit still with yourself, or you can’t bear to have nothing to do. You do it because you don’t like yourself. Maybe you do it because you’re tired or bored or frustrated. Any or all or a combination of these might lead to binging in the first place. These same feeling states may continue to trigger binges. Or, the binging may develop a life of its own, occurring because that’s what you’ve gotten used to doing. It now feels weird not to do it in certain circumstances. And now, of course, you feel even worse about yourself; you may think you’re hopeless—and so it’s even harder to get yourself to do the uncomfortable work of stopping.

This part of the work involves identifying—notice and name—not only when your binges occur, but also how you’re feeling when they occur, and what you’re thinking when they occur. The worksheets in Module 11 and below will guide you in doing that. Do them now if you haven’t already. Eating works very well to soothe and distract us from feelings and thoughts we don’t want to have. To stop binging for good, these feelings must be cared for in some different way, even if other ways aren’t as immediately effective as a binge might be. And to care for them differently, you have to recognize them.

*Binging Gets Rigid: Relax*

So, you identify when and why you binge. Then you try to care for yourself differently, talk to yourself differently, cope differently. Over and over again. If all this happens, your binging will diminish. To succeed, though, you’ll probably have to soften up a bit—for binging becomes a very rigid activity, and bingers tend to get very rigid
with themselves. Changing the binge pattern is helped by relaxing your thinking in several different ways.

_The rigid pattern_

Here is what I mean when I say that binging becomes a rigid pattern. Think about this: A certain feeling occurs, then you binge. A certain situation develops, then you binge. You see the brownies, you smell the cookies, then you binge. Many people even describe feeling as if a “force” comes over them that’s beyond their conscious control. In other words, “If the feeling comes, I binge, I don’t have control over that.” It can feel extremely strange then to not binge. It can be hard to imagine, even. The pattern solidifies.

Even if your initial urge is not as strong as usual, you may binge anyway due to the strength of these kinds of associations. So try hard to STOP and take a breath. Then another. Note to yourself that, yes, here you are, in that feeling again. Just _that_ can sometimes allow enough room for a new thought to enter: “Maybe I’ll try something else just this one time.” Or, “Let me try this….I can always still eat if it doesn’t work.” _Any_ degree of difference in the chain of events can help break the strong associations in the long run.

_The restrictive diet mentality_

Behavior patterns become rigid; so, usually, does a binger’s thinking as well. I’ve discussed the “dieting mentality” before. That is, research proves that _overrestriction_ of food—as in very strict dieting-- leads to binging over 90% of the time. Of course, the binging might occur because we’re hungry when dieting. But also, people usually want _more_ when they fear deprivation. Even the _thought_ of deprivation can spur binging.
Bingers, whether they’re dieting or not, usually spend a great deal of time thinking about how and what they shouldn’t eat. Even if they’re not actively mulling it over, the background to most of their choosing is “I shouldn’t”. So, the idea of deprivation lurks in the mind almost constantly when this is the case. And it makes binging much more likely to happen. Shifting from “I shouldn’t”, to “Does this really make sense for me right now?”, can help a lot.

**Punitive self-talk**

Bingers’ thinking becomes rigid in yet another way. It shows up in their feelings about themselves and their self-talk. Thoughts become not only rigid, but downright punitive. Think how often you may have vowed to never eat this food again, or to starve yourself tomorrow. Many stringent pledges are made in post-binge distress. Those vows to straighten out never hold. The binge-regret-binge-again cycle holds fast, as do the severe self-talk and the negative feelings that go with it. Research has indeed suggested that vowing ahead of time to “not beat yourself up” if you overeat actually reduces the amount of food you’re likely to take after all.

So, approaching the problem with restrictive attitudes, ironclad rules and stringent vows doesn’t seem to work. Softening up a little bit does work better. You might hear “self-forgiveness” and think “letting yourself off the hook”…as in “I’ll never change then….” On the contrary, however, approaching your problem with simple, practical understanding—“this is hard, willpower is not the only factor here, millions of others do lose control too”—can calm you down and give your thinking some room to shift.

Also, consider that you may feel bad—or anxious or lonely or low—and binging helps that sometimes. You’d empathize with anyone else feeling as bad. And you’d
probably think that empathy a good and healthy response to the hurting person. Self-understanding and self-compassion helps relax your rigidity and allows for more freedom of thought and action. The other attitudes haven’t done so. Some of the work that follows will help you see how it might be if you to begin to feel compassion for yourself as you deal with this difficult problem.

*Know That You’re Getting There*

If you are hard on yourself, you may not in fact notice and acknowledge where and when you *are* doing better. But doing so reinforces your efforts and increases the likelihood of your success in the end.

It’s common to experience false starts when stopping binging. You may plan to try distracting yourself, journaling, or any of the other suggested alternative activities or coping skills you’ve read about. Then you give in and eat anyway. Or you make it through one day only to lose it the next. If you think back to Module 3, though, on how change occurs, you’ll remember that these experiences may be preparing you for eventually making changes that last.

Often what people notice as they struggle and try to avoid binging is that the quantity and quality of their binges change—before the behavior stops happening for good. In other words, people may feel just as awful about binging. But nevertheless they note that binges now involve less food than before. They’re shorter. At the same time, binge foods may become less damaging—say breakfast cereal replaces the cookies, baked chips instead of full-fat, etc. No, not ideal. But *better.*
Sometimes these kinds of gradual changes in quantity and quality prepare a person for--eventually lead to--an inner sense of “I don’t have to do this”, or “It’s not worth it”, or “I just can’t stand this, I’m going out for a walk instead”. Once those thoughts start to occur and feel real, you’ll know you’ve broken up the behavioral habit. You’ve integrated a new way of being with food. You’ve started to get used to caring better for yourself. People reach that point at different rates and with different patterns to the change process. It’s important to know that you can still be on the path to change even while you struggle. It’s important to start and keep going as best you can, in whatever way you can.
WORKSHEETS FOR Special Edition 2

The work of stopping binging involves self-examination and practical skills that have been referred to throughout EatSanely. While some new activities are suggested in this Special Edition, review and repetition help a great deal. Use or reuse some of the following tools, which relate the the sections above in “Regaining Control”:

- Journaling (Module 6)
- Identifying and challenging unhelpful thoughts (Module 7)
- Sitting and delaying (Module 8)
- Mindfulness exercises (Module 8 and 13)
- Engaging in alternative activities (Module 9)
- Rating your hunger and eating, or not, accordingly (Module 10)
- Analyzing your binge episodes (Modules 11 and 15)
- Using affirmations (Module 7, 11 and others)
- Exercise (Module 14)
- Calling on someone for help (Module 16)

Think of how and why to choose and practice with them:

**Identifying Binge Times and Triggers:** use the modified food log found in Module 11 and below. Reread module 6 if you are unsure how and why to do this. You can also identify unhelpful thoughts and feeling states that trigger you with exercises outlined in other modules—by journaling, identifying unhelpful thoughts, sitting and delaying, rating your hunger and analyzing your binge episodes.

**Coping Skills:** when you are trying not to binge, you must cope with uncomfortable, or maybe even painful, feeling states until they pass. You can practice ways of coping without food using exercises from in various modules: by journaling, doing mindfulness or relaxation exercises, engaging in alternative activities, doing affirmations, calling on others for help.

**Alternative Activities:** often when resisting the urge to binge, it’s useful to go do something for a while. The urge will change or pass. While just about any coping skill can be thought of as an “alternative activity”, you might want to also keep a list of things you could do to distract yourself. Review especially exercises in Modules 8 and 9. Using movement—a time to exercise or take a walk—is a particularly good way to pass that time.

A few key worksheets from previous modules are included here, followed by new ones for the Special Edition work.

Worksheets 4-6 apply especially to the section above called “Binging Gets Rigid: Relax”
WORKSHEET #1: SKILLS FOCUS

To stop binging, keeping up a food log is important: to help you make sure you’re eating adequately, to track when you binge and what you’re thinking and feeling at those times. Then, it’s important to analyze more closely what was happening and what else you might have done during those episodes. Accordingly, Worksheets 2 and 3 constitute the food log and analysis sheets you first encountered in Module 11. If you’re not already using them regularly to track your binging, start or restart with them now.

In addition to those worksheets, however, a number of previous worksheets could prove useful, or even essential, now in your stop the behavior efforts. Use this sheet (add others as needed) to take stock of what skills, supports, or practices you might need to call on. Circle any questions that you answer “no” to. Then revisit the related module to practice that activity. For those that you have tried already, rate their effectiveness on a scale of 0-10, with 10 being “very effective” and 0 being “made no difference at all”. You might want to revisit and practice more with any that rate at least a 5. Go with 3’s if you have no 5’s.

*Have you examined your thinking before, during, or after binges and challenged any unhelpful thoughts that contribute to the behavior? Rating _____

*Have you practiced “delaying” eating and taken notes on what’s occurred then? Rating _____

*Have you practiced mindfulness exercises? Rating _____ (rate each type of mindfulness exercise separately)

*Have you tried exercise or other substitute activities? Rating _____ (rate each type of activity tried separately)

*Have you tried writing your thoughts and feelings in a journal before and/or after binging? Rating _____ (rate before- and after- journaling separately)

*Have you tried calling someone for support? Rating _____ (if you try calling different people, rate each separately)

*Have you used the hunger scale to sort out confusion about hunger vs. craving? Rating _____

What else have you tried? (list activity and rating; use extra sheets if necessary)
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
**WORKSHEET #2: Food Log for Stopping Binging**

While working to stop binging, use the expanded food log first offered in Module 6. Put a check next to any eating episodes that felt like binges.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>FOOD/amt.</th>
<th>THOUGHTS &amp; FEELINGS</th>
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</table>
WORKSHEET #3: Analyzing Binges

Complete this worksheet after any binge, even if you feel guilty and don’t want to think about it. Doing so will help you break the binge pattern.

Describe what happened. Be specific. Cite what happened leading up to, during, and after the binge episode (use extra sheets if necessary).
Looking back on it, what might have prevented you from binging? List any ideas that you have.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What might you do the next time a similar situation occurs?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Will you have trouble getting back on track now? If so, what might help you?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

How can you take care of yourself now—in other words, to avoid feeling guilty or otherwise awful? Use extra sheets if necessary. See Addendum #5 if you go blank when trying to think of how to be kind to yourself.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
WORKSHEET #4: Breaking the Chains of Association

These suggestions aim to help you do something different when you have the urge to binge. Anything that is different can help break the chains of association that reinforce the strong pull of your binging. When you have the urge to binge, ideally you will engage in one of the coping behaviors, or try one of the skills listed above. Just about all bingers, however, say that sometimes they just don’t think of doing something new, or that they strongly resist it. If you can insert even a small difference into the routine or the behavior, even if you still eat, it can help in the long run.

1. Your environment –

Do you always binge in the same place? Set things up so that you have to be someplace else. Also, if you usually sit, stand. If you usually stand, walk or sit.

If you tend to binge on the same types of foods over and over, try not buying them. Tell yourself you can eat them when you’re out but not at home. Tell yourself you can eat them if you make them from scratch each time you want them. If you feel that not buying is too big a step, try buying a smaller quantity, a different brand, something you don’t like quite as much.

Do you always binge when alone? Ask people to be with you, and tell them why. Taking away the “sneak” factor makes a big difference for some.

Do you always binge at the same time? If so, make a plan for that time period to do something else. Tell someone that you’re going to do this.

2. How you eat –

Try eating whatever it is you’re going to eat in a different way. Chew more slowly. Eat half of whatever you’re eating, take a three minute break, then finish. Make the break even longer if you can. If you usually eat something cold, heat it up or vice versa.

Try to stop eating before all of the food is gone, even if you’re only able to save a spoonful. Throw this away. (Do this in a manner that makes it unsalvageable—put it down the disposal, mash or melt it.) Try throwing greater and greater quantities away in the future.

Give yourself permission to eat what you’re going to eat. Set it up nicely on a plate with a placemat on a table. Eat it there.

3. Afterward –

Try to be kind to yourself, even if you’re unhappy about what you ate. Tell yourself it’s hard, you’ll be trying again in the future. If you’ve tried any of the above suggestions, NOTE THAT YOU TRIED SOMETHING DIFFERENT. NOTE WHETHER OR NOT IT CHANGED YOUR EXPERIENCE, EVEN IF SLIGHTLY.
**WORKSHEET #5: Changing Restrictive Thinking, or the “Diet Mentality”**

These exercises require you to try to catch yourself when you’re thinking in an overrestrictive manner about food. You can recite the new statements to yourself each time you catch the overrestrictive thinking. Even more powerful, you can write down the old thoughts and then the new thoughts to challenge them alongside (see Module 6 for full instructions on cognitive restructuring if you want to do the exercises in writing).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Restrictive Thinking</th>
<th>New Thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I shouldn’t have that.</td>
<td>Does this make sense for me, given what I’ve eaten today, and what my long-term goals are? Can I afford it? I am the one in charge here, after all. There will always be other opportunities for this type of food, if I say “no” now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once I start, I can’t stop.</td>
<td>That stuff usually triggers me. Do I think I can learn to eat it in moderation now? Is now the time I want to practice that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I should be on a diet.</td>
<td>What’s best for me is to learn how to eat healthily and sanely and to make wise choices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can’t believe I ate that.</td>
<td>Well, I guess I didn’t make the best choice right then. Live and learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m a pig (glutton/slob, etc.)</td>
<td>I’m struggling to change my habits right now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This food is dangerous (bad, etc.)</td>
<td>I’m going to step away and take a deep breath. I’m getting confused about my freedom of choice right now.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WORKSHEET #6: Going Easier on Yourself

This multi-part exercise introduces you to the feeling of going easier on yourself. If you have a particularly hard time with any aspect of this exercise, keep practicing. That is, do it again and again on future days. Ideally, you’ll do the three parts of the exercise on different days, not back-to-back on the same day.

1. **Visualization** – for step 1, start by sitting comfortably with eyes gently closed. Take a deep breath in and out, then another, to relax your body a bit. Loosen up any part of your body that’s tense—perhaps neck, shoulders, face. Then, just let yourself breathe naturally.


   Now, holding this tableau in your mind, say to yourself, “It’s OK. Whatever I eat, I’m not going to beat myself up. I’m going to go easy on myself. It’s all OK.” What do you feel now? Did any of the previous body sensations or thoughts change? Write down what you noticed in your journal, along with any other insights that may have occurred.

2. **Affirmation/Journaling** – to start this second part of the exercise, write one of the following affirmations on a page of your journal (it’s okay to make up a new statement of your own, with a similar sentiment, if you wish). Choose the one that feels most right to use:

   I’M GOING TO GO EASY ON MYSELF.
   I FORGIVE MYSELF FOR HOWEVER I’VE MESSED UP.
   I DO MY BEST.
   I WANT TO BE NICER TO MYSELF.
   I WILL TREAT MYSELF KINDLY.

   Then, write about your reactions to having written this statement. Did it feel good? Did you relax? Did you want to argue with it? Did you feel cynical about it? What other associations do you think you have to the idea of being kinder to yourself? Where might you have learned those? How do they help you, or not?

3. **Live Practice** – for this last part, use a natural incident where you would usually fear overeating. Maybe someone has brought donuts to work. Maybe your kids are insisting on pizza for dinner or your spouse has brought home ice cream. Maybe you’re facing a huge holiday feast. Before you eat anything, take a deep breath. Say to yourself, “I’m going to try to choose wisely here. Whatever I do, I’m NOT going to beat myself. I’m going to be kind to myself.” You can tell someone else what your intention is, too, if you like. Note what feelings you have about the food following this. Note what choices you make, how you end up eating.
EXTRA RESOURCES

PUBLICATIONS:

Fairburn, Christopher, Overcoming Binge Eating, (Guilford, 1995)

Catalogs for related books, audiotapes, and more:


Hazelden Publications – www.hazelden.org — resources for addictions