



## Targeting You Triggers

Have you ever caught yourself reaching for the Pepperidge Farms cookie bag whenever your mom calls? Do you habitually go for the burger and fries before your Friday meeting with your boss? Does the anniversary of a break up, a lost job, or a friend's cancer diagnosis send you head first into a pint of Ben and Jerry's?

Sometimes people and events (even those long past or far in the future) serve as a sort of emotional booby trap - they spring up and set off an emotional response you were neither prepared for nor comfortable with. The person/event triggers the emotion - the emotion triggers the action - and the action is to eat.

None of this would be a big deal if the emotions triggered were comfortable or easy to deal with. The problem is these triggered emotions are not comfortable. In fact, they are so uncomfortable that you will go out of your way (and into the kitchen) to avoid them. And they are sneaky. Some days, you talk to your mom and don't even think about the bag of cookies in the pantry. But on other days - days when you feel stressed or tired or just fed up - she hasn't even finished her hello and you're stuffing Milanos in your mouth.

So, what's a tired, stressed-out girl to do?

The first step is recognize that all emotions are good emotions - even the ones that don't feel like it. Naturally, we all like and appreciate the ones that feel pleasurable (joy, contentment, excitement, love, etc.). And we all try to avoid the ones that don't feel as fine (sadness, disappointment, loneliness, shame, etc.). The secret is that all emotions are valuable. Emotions exist for the sole purpose of transmitting important information to you. If you are avoiding feeling any emotion, you are missing important information about yourself and about your world.

The second step is to realize that running from emotions and/or covering them up with food won't help you feel fulfilled. Think about it. Do you feel fulfilled now? I didn't think so.

The final step is to actually let yourself feel your emotions. It will be scary. It will be uncomfortable. You might cry. But it won't kill you. And in the end, it just might free you.

## Okay, Let's Get Started:

This isn't going to take a lot of time, but is it going to take some concentrated effort. So pick a time when you can sit by yourself and really connect – without interruption or excuses. Then take a deep breath, clear your head, and turn the page. That's it. Let's go.

## Identifying Your Emotional Triggers: Part 1

Think about the last time you reacted to an emotion you were feeling with food.

1. What emotion were you feeling?
2. What do you think triggered this emotion? Think about what you were doing right before you started to feel uncomfortable. Write down the first thing that comes to you.
3. Was this trigger outside of you (a person, an event, an activity) or internal (a thought or memory)?

\*\*\*Repeat this until you have at least 5 or 6 emotional triggers identified.

### Here are two samples to help get you started:

Think about the last time you reacted to an emotion you were feeling with food.

1. What emotion were you feeling?
  - A. Anxious
  - B. Disappointed
2. What do you think triggered this emotion? Think about what you were doing right before you started to feel uncomfortable. Write down the first thing that comes to you.
  - A. I was looking at my to-do list and realizing I don't have enough time to get it all done.
  - B. I was on the phone with my sister.
3. Was this trigger outside of you (a person, an event, an activity) or internal (a thought or memory)?
  - A. Outside of me – an activity – looking at my to-do list.
  - B. Internal – a memory – she was talking about her book club and I suddenly remembered how she never took me with her to parties in high school.

## Identifying Your Emotional Triggers: Part 2

Think about the last time you reacted to an emotion you were feeling with food and answer the questions below.

1. What emotion were you feeling?
2. What was your reaction?
3. Why did you do it? Why didn't you just let yourself feel the emotion? (List all the rationales and excuses you come up with. Seriously. Defend yourself here.)

\*\*\*Repeat this 5 or 6 times.

### Here are two samples to help get you started:

Think about the last time you reacted to an emotion you were feeling with food.

1. What emotion were you feeling?
  - A. Anxious
  - B. Disappointed
2. What was your reaction?
  - A. I went to the kitchen, defrosted a pound of bacon and made a sandwich even though I wasn't hungry.
  - B. I started snacking on a bag of chips while I was on the phone. I finished the entire bag.
3. Why did you do it? Why didn't you just let yourself feel the emotion? (List all the rationales and excuses you come up with. Seriously. Defend yourself here.)
  - A. I just wanted to do something so I wouldn't feel like a failure. I deserved it. I've been so overwhelmed lately. I never do anything right. I am tired of feeling bad. I hate to cry and feeling anxious makes me cry.
  - B. I was afraid I would scream at my sister for never inviting me anywhere. I am tired of feeling so alone. If I am eating I don't have to talk to her. What's the point of talking to her about how I feel? She never listens to me anyway. It is just too pitiful.

## Now What Do I Do?

First, pat yourself on the back. You just figured out something new about yourself - without judgment or criticism. That's something to be proud of.

Now it's time to think about what you've discovered.

Here are some questions to get you started:

1. Read through your responses in Parts 1 and 2. What emotions come up more than once? Write them down.
2. Notice the people/events that came up. Are they mostly inside you (thoughts and memories) or are they mostly outside you (people and events)?
3. Notice which people/events correspond to which emotions. Do you feel helpless when you talk to members of your family? Are you anxious about work-related things, but not in any other area of your life?
4. Notice your excuses/rationales? Are any of them repeated? When you read them do you nod your head in agreement or do you think they sound unreasonable? Do any of them sound silly to you now?
5. Take a close look at the emotions again. What would happen if food didn't exist and this emotion came up. What would you do? Is there a healthier choice you could make to deal with this emotion? (Breathe for 5 minutes, take a walk, pet the cat, break a pencil, etc.)

Use this information as a spring board for considering what emotions you are avoiding with food. Then consider for a moment what would happen if you simply felt those emotions. Pick one and consider: What if you simply sat still and felt that emotion for thirty seconds? A minute? What information could you get if you listened to the emotion instead of running from it?

Take a moment and try it right now. Set a timer for 30 seconds. Just breathe and feel for 30 seconds. Notice where in your body you feel the emotion first. Let the feeling pass through you. When your 30 seconds are up, imagine it flowing out of you. Finally take another deep breath, stand up, stretch, jump, or shake your body, then answer these question:

1. How do you feel now, knowing you can sit with an uncomfortable emotion and survive?
2. What did you learn about your ability to handle an uncomfortable emotion?

Nice work. The next time you catch yourself reacting to a trigger with food, notice what you are feeling. Take a minute and actually feel that feeling – without judgment or criticism. You don't need to do anything else. Just name it and feel it. Oftentimes, simply acknowledging an emotion will cause it to dissipate. Then ask yourself what healthy action you can take to deal with this emotion. Take a walk, jump up and down, sit still for moment, get a hug, or journal it out. Once you start learning how to feel and healthfully address your emotions, the more comfortable and welcome they will all become.

Be well,

Trish Bailey

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