

# There Is No Shame in Asking for Help

*By Melissa O'Neill, LCSW*

Stress, in and of itself, is not bad. High-achieving individuals in the law profession often thrive under a modicum of pressure; however, too much of any good thing is, in fact, too much.

Most people know of the dangers involved with maladaptive coping strategies such as alcohol, substances, even gambling. Conversely, few recognize the negative consequences involved when food is used in a similar fashion.

Food exists to fuel the body and provide pleasure to the palate. It was never intended to serve as a tool for coping with stress, yet untold numbers of people use food for that purpose every single day.

Stress eating, also known as emotional eating, has little to do with hunger or enjoyment. Its exclusive agenda is emotion avoidance. This is how it can unfold: After an impossibly difficult day at work, you swing by and pick up a pizza on the way home. You eat far past the point of feeling full, but notice that the stress is diminishing. You grab a pint of ice cream, and before you know it, the tub is empty.

Another common scenario involves hidden candy or other treats in the desk drawer—you have a combative conversation ... and you immediately reach for a chocolate bar to mitigate distress and feel better.

Questions you can ask to help determine if you are struggling with emotional eating include:

- Do you eat more when you're feeling stressed?
- Do you eat when you're not hungry or when you're full?
- Do you eat to feel better (to calm and soothe yourself when you're mad, bored, anxious, etc.)?
- Do you reward yourself with food?
- Do you regularly eat until you've stuffed yourself?
- Does food make you feel safe? Do you feel like food is a friend?
- Do you feel powerless or out of control around food?

Emotional eating is frequently a mindless behavior and, of course, it works in the moment. While focusing on the food and the process of consumption, you are not reviewing a painful argument or horrendous case load, because your mind is otherwise occupied. The problem is that when the soothing behavior stops, everything you sought to avoid returns.

Emotional eating is a temporary distraction, but a dangerous one because ultimately you can experience medical complications such as increased weight, diabetes, heart disease, heightened cholesterol and blood pressure, to name only a few. Add that to the psychological consequences of the shame, secrecy, and guilt often associated with emotional eating, and your discomfort only escalates. Finally, reaching outside of ourselves for temporary relief often only postpones our stress without tending mindfully to our emotional needs over time.

For this reason, it is not uncommon for emotional eating to lead to other food-related addictions or disorders. In women, bulimia is one of them, in which vomiting is used to reverse the consumption of food. If extreme weight gain occurs, women often head in the diametrically opposed direction and start restricting.

Although men can and do fall victim to bulimia and anorexia, binge eating disorder (BED) is much more likely. With this disorder, an enormous amount of food is typically consumed in a somewhat out-of-control manner, but no compensatory behavior such as purging or excessive exercising is utilized. Therefore, weight gain is nearly inevitable. BED is the fastest growing eating disorder in America today, especially among men.

The legal profession often presents a double-edged sword. Regardless of which aspect of law you practice, pressure is inherent in the work. And no doubt, the majority of you exist in the shadow of the ever-popular, media-driven attorney stereotype: strong, in control, highly competitive, smart, capable, confident—the list of attributes goes on and on. These

qualities provide precious little room for problems of a psychiatric nature. This is precisely why many lawyers find it difficult to ask for help, perceiving it as weakness or even failure.

Here is the bottom line: all attorneys are human beings. As such, you may need help from time to time. Whether you struggle with food, alcohol, drugs, or other issues such as trauma, depression or anxiety, recovery is possible.

There is no shame in asking for help. There is only sorrow if you suffer in silence and do not get the professional treatment you need and deserve.

**To learn more about other ways to improve your overall well-being as an attorney, call 312-726-6607 or email the Lawyers' Assistance Program at [gethelp@illinoislap.org](mailto:gethelp@illinoislap.org).**

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