



IDENTIFYING AND CALMING EMOTIONAL HUNGER IN TIMES OF QUARANTINE

The current situation of self-quarantine we are living in is challenging for many of us. We spend many hours each day, if not all day, at home with a few obligations concerning others (such as going to work, studying, or taking care of our family). This situation can make it truly difficult for us to follow the most basic day-to-day routines.

Talking with colleagues and friends, I have realized that one of the essential routines that this situation has affected is, without a doubt, our eating habits. More than ever, nowadays, it is necessary to maintain regular meal times. Doing so not only helps us to have a routine, stay connected with time, feel in touch with reality, or get closer to normality during these moments where the sensation of unreality seizes many of us. Being well-nourished also helps us to stay healthy, maintain a more positive state of mind, feel physically more energetic, and be in control of the variables that we can manage.

Many of us find ourselves eating outside of our regular hours often and sometimes out of boredom as a way to pass the time. Some others even forget to eat, since the anxiety and uncertainty of these days diminish their appetite or make them lose track of time.

In both cases, the emotions we feel are the ones deciding when and how we eat. Uncertainty, boredom, anxiety, or fear are affecting our day-to-day, the most basic routines, and they are taking control of our eating habits.

When we eat not to feel or to quiet our emotions, we do so because we have what we call "emotional hunger." **Emotional hunger** is what **comes suddenly**

and urgently; it does not increase gradually as real hunger does. It comes as an **unexpected "attack," urging as to comply with its demands**. Besides, **it is capricious, and it invites us to eat particular and usually not very healthy foods**. Unlike real hunger, which we could satiate by eating any food and is connected with sensations in the stomach, emotional hunger does not have to do with a physiological need for survival. Instead, it has to do with the pleasure we feel when eating certain types of food (sweets, crunchy or very salty snacks, etc.) or as an activity that occupies and distracts us from our emotions or thoughts.

Physical Hunger	Emotional Hunger
Gradual	Sudden
Patient	Urgent
Based in the stomach	Mouth and mind
Open to different foods	Specific food
Physical need	Paired with an upsetting emotion

Learning how to identify what type of hunger we feel can help us know how to deal with it, especially if it is emotional hunger. **The first step is to try not to satisfy it so that our emotions are not the ones that determine our behavior, but ourselves**. What, then, can we do to calm emotional hunger? Well, here you have some tips that can help:

1. **SET BARRIERS**: Identify all the foods you usually eat in these types of situations and **put them in an inaccessible box or closet. Stick a piece of paper on the door or the cover to help you wonder if what you feel is real or emotional hunger and with alternatives to do when you feel the latter**.
2. **DISTRACT YOUR MIND**: More procedural tasks are a great alternative as they will keep you busy, and it will be easier for you to ignore this desire to eat. **Take the opportunity to spend some time doing something you enjoy, so some house cleaning, or talk to a friend. Breathing and relaxation techniques can also be great allies right now**.

3. **EAT WHAT YOU NEED:** If you finally decide to eat, prepare a **serving adjusted to your dietary needs** for a healthy intake. **Do not take the entire package** out, as you will end up eating more than you need.

4. **EAT WITH YOUR 5 SENSES:** You can start by **carefully observing the food you are going to eat, describe it, and pay attention to every detail. Use your sense of smell and touch** to connect with the substance. **Pay attention to the physiological responses of your body** (probably, at this point, you will already be salivating). Take small bites and **play to see if it tastes different when you melt it in your mouth or when you chew it.** Also, **pay attention to the sounds you can perceive throughout the ritual.** Imagine that you have to explain to someone who has never seen that type of food or how it tastes, smells, looks, feels or sounds.

Now all you have to do is to ask yourself what kind of hunger you are feeling, so that you can start training the tips above that will help you eat more consciously and healthily.

Finally, remember that this difficult period can also be an excellent opportunity to train and acquire new habits that we can maintain in the future.

Saray Cáliz Aguilera
General Health Psychologist at Sinews MTI
IE University Clinical Counselor

