

## Don't overeat like Oprah

By Elizabeth Cohen, CNN

January 20, 2011 7:57 a.m. EST

(CNN) -- Just like the rest of us, Oprah Winfrey has her dark moments. Winfrey's was in 1998, when a segment on her show, "Remembering Your Spirit" was coming under fire for being too New Age-y and her new movie, "Beloved," had a disappointing performance at the box office.

"All of that kind of happened on the same day," Winfrey said a year later on her television show. "All of these stories were coming out about letting the Oprah backlash begin."

Winfrey handled the stress by asking her chef to make her macaroni and cheese and bread pudding.

Recently, CNN's Piers Morgan [asked her about that time](#).

"How much macaroni did you eat?" he asked.

"I ate about 30 pounds worth. I'm not kidding," Winfrey told Morgan. "I really, literally, went into a tailspin with it."

Winfrey's not alone in using food to fight emotional distress. [A 2007 study by Harvard Medical School psychiatrists](#) found binge eating disorder is more common than either anorexia or bulimia, affecting 3.5% of women and 2% of men.

Binge eating is included only provisionally in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. The manual is the standard by which psychiatrists diagnose mental illnesses and has implications for insurance coverage. For the fifth edition of the DSM, [many experts are recommending that binge eating be listed as its own diagnosis.](#)

Binge eaters don't just eat too much dessert at their favorite restaurant or pig out at a party. Binge eaters often eat huge amounts -- entire large pizzas and cartons of ice cream, for example -- and overeat at least once a week for three months, according to experts. They often eat alone because they're embarrassed over how much they're eating, and then feel disgusted with themselves and guilty afterward.

Counselors say what fuels the binges is a desire to get away from an unpleasant feeling. In Winfrey's case, that was feeling bad about the criticism of her show and the lower-than-expected box office numbers.

"It's not really about the mac and cheese," says Mary O'Malley, a counselor who treats binge eaters in Kirkland, Washington. "You're eating because you want something inside of you to numb out."

Some people with binge eating need professional counseling, and the American Psychological Association has [advice for choosing a treatment program.](#)

Other binge eaters find help in support groups, such as those run by [Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous](#) and [Overeaters Anonymous.](#)

Many binge eaters say they've managed to stop by using self-help techniques. Here from experts, former binge eaters and Winfrey herself is advice on what to do if you're a binge eater.

1. Realize you can change

"The most pervasive misconception about binge eating is that it's hopeless, that I'm hopeless," says Ellen Shuman, vice president of the [Binge Eating Disorder Association](#).

"There is recovery from binge eating disorders."

[Self-help treatment effective for binge eating, researchers say](#)

## 2. Identify your emotional distress

Winfrey says at first, she thought it was all about the food.

"I thought I just wanted some macaroni," she said on her show in 1999.

On the show, Winfrey told book author Gary Zukav it took her a while to connect the eating with her emotional distress.

"I didn't connect the powerlessness until just this moment," she said.

## 3. Just before a binge, remind yourself why you're bingeing

Let's dissect a binge. Before the actual eating occurs, the binger has what Shuman calls a "food thought" -- a thought that eating would be a good idea. Before that thought turns into action, try to figure out why you're eating, Shuman suggests.

Just last weekend, Shuman, who suffered binge eating disorder for decades, had a food thought that could have turned into a binge but didn't.

"I asked myself, 'What am I feeling right now?' she says. "I realized I had food thoughts because I had to write something for my website, but I didn't want to do it. I just wanted to watch two DVDs I had at home and have dinner with my friends."

She decided instead of eating, she'd write for three hours, which would leave her enough time to watch one of the DVDs and have dinner. She says making that plan averted using food as an emotional crutch.

#### 4. Figure out if you're distorting the truth

Once you identify the emotion that's leading to the binge, you should then ask yourself whether you're upset over nothing.

"I remember once I was upset because someone at work passed my desk and kept going," Shuman remembers. "I thought to myself, 'Did I do something to upset them? Did I do something that made them not like me anymore?' Later I learned they had an emergency call from their kid, and they were running to their office to take the call."

The lesson: "I learned I was binging over something that wasn't even true."

Shuman says if she'd been counseling Winfrey at the time, she would have encouraged her to think about the significance of her disappointing movie sales and the criticism of her show.

"I would have told her the critics and the public have the right to their opinion, and it shouldn't cause Oprah to feel badly about Oprah because their opinions didn't match hers," she says.

"I would have said, 'Does it mean you'll never be able to make a good movie ever again? No. And while you have every right to feel upset, what value is there to doing damage to yourself by binging?' "

#### 5. Feel the sadness

When something is truly sad, sometimes you just have to feel it, O'Malley says.

"On the morning of September 11, I woke up and turned on the TV," she remembers. "I was overwhelmed with calls from clients, and we had a group that evening and as soon as the last person left, I felt panicked and overwhelmed inside."

She went to the bedroom to get her purse, and then to the car, intending to buy food for a binge.

"I recognized what was going on inside me. My compulsion said to go to the store, and I said to my compulsion, 'We can go to the store, but I'll remind you we don't feel very well when we do that.' I said to my compulsion, 'Can you give me five minutes?' "

Then, O'Malley went to the porch and cried for five minutes. When she was done, the urge to binge was gone.

"I don't know exactly what was going on, maybe just sadness or maybe fear of the terrorists," she says. "All I know is I had this uncomfortable, yucky feeling, and I wanted to get away from it. But when I let the sadness arrive and pass through me, there was no need to binge."