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Managing cues

Have you ever found yourself mindlessly munching on a tasty treat you didn't intend to eat or zoning out in front of the TV or computer instead of getting into your aerobic zone with exercise? It may seem like these situations "just happen," but most people don't act completely spontaneously. There usually is something in the social, internal, or external environment that acts as a cue to "trigger" a behavior. You may not be conscious of these cues, but the behaviors triggered can sabotage your weight management efforts. Cues to overeat and limit activity abound in our society. Not everyone, however, has the same reaction to a particular cue. For these reasons, it is important for you to identify the factors in your life that trigger overeating or inactivity. Once you've identified these cues, you can develop strategies to minimize their impact on your weight management efforts. Since cues for eating and inactivity are often different, each category will be examined separately.

Sources of Eating Cues

One of the most obvious eating cues is hunger. There are two types of hunger— physical and psychological.

Physical Hunger is usually accompanied by physical symptoms, such as stomach pangs, an empty feeling in your stomach, or light-headedness. These symptoms usually occur two to four hours after your last meal. They are internal physiological signals from your body telling you it needs to be refueled.

Psychological Hunger usually occurs without any physical symptoms. It is often characterized by specific food cravings or preoccupation with thoughts of food. Seeing a fast food commercial on television and suddenly craving that food is an example of psychological hunger brought on by a specific food cue. In general, psychological hunger originates from your environment.

tools for success

- Identify personal cues for eating and physical inactivity.
- Distinguish between physical and psychological hunger.
- Modify cues associated with eating and physical inactivity.

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Environmental Cues

Let's look at how aspects of different environments—social, external, and/or internal—can trigger your eating behaviors.

Social Cues

These cues arise when you are with other people or in social situations. For example:

- Do certain people trigger you to eat and/or drink inappropriately?
- Do parties and special occasions prompt you to overeat?
- Do you tend to overeat when you are conducting business over a meal?

External Cues

This type of cue comes from your surrounding environment and your activities in that environment. As the following examples show, the cues may be tangible (such as a specific food) or intangible (such as time of day).

- Does the mere sight or smell of food make you want to eat?
- Does a specific food trigger you to eat?
- Do you tend to overeat when you are drinking alcohol?
- Do particular places (kitchen, movie theater, car, or buffet restaurants) make you want to eat?
- Do you find yourself eating when you are involved in a specific activity, such as reading, watching TV, cooking, or talking on the phone?
- Do you tend to eat at certain times of the day (during your coffee break, as soon as you get home from work, just before going to bed, or in the middle of the night), even if you are not physically hungry? Eating out of habit can be a significant source of excess calories.

Internal Cues

Internal cues are those that come from within you. Do you tend to:

- “Medicate your mood with food”? In other words, do you eat when you are feeling blue? Lonely? Stressed? Anxious? Depressed? Happy? Bored? Moods and emotions are significant sources of psychological hunger.
- Falter when you are fatigued? Mental or physical fatigue, like alcohol, has a tendency to reduce your motivation level when you need it the most.
- Talk yourself out of success with negative self-talk, such as “I am never going to reach my goal,” or “I look too fat to exercise.” Irrational thinking can easily tempt you to give up.

Coping with Food Cues

Just about everyone, regardless of their weight, has a few cues that trigger inappropriate eating. Successful weight managers know how to respond to these cues. The first step when you have the urge to eat is to ask yourself, “What type of hunger am I feeling?” When you experience physical hunger, you need to eat—being mindful to eat appropriate foods within your daily eating plan. If you decide you are experiencing psychological hunger, you need to identify where the cue to eat is coming from (whether social, external, or internal) and deal with it appropriately. There are two basic strategies you can use to cope with cues. You can either eliminate the cue or adapt your response to the cue by using preplanned strategies.

Examples of Cue Elimination

Social Cue: You notice you eat inappropriately when going out to lunch with work colleagues.

Elimination Strategy: Ask your colleagues to support your weight management efforts by: 1) avoiding “ribbing” you when you select healthy alternatives; 2) choosing restaurants with meal options that fit into your meal plan; 3) joining you for a brown bag lunch (you could even provide the lunch!); 4) accompanying you on your usual noontime walk.

Environmental Eating Cues

Instructions In the chart below, identify which environmental cues trigger eating issues for you and describe how each cue affects you.

	Trigger?		If yes, describe.
	Yes	No	
Social Cues			
Particular people			
Parties			
Business			
Travel			
Other			
External Cues			
Sight of food			
Smell of food			
Particular food(s)			
When drinking alcohol			
Other			
Kitchen			
Restaurant			
Workplace			
Other			
Watching TV			
Reading			
Cooking			
Talking on the phone			
Other			
Before lunch			
Before dinner			
Before bed			
Middle of the night			
Other			
Internal Cues			
Depressed			
Angry			
Lonely			
Happy			
Bored			
Tired			
Other			

Physical Inactivity Cues

Instructions In the chart below, identify the environmental cues that trigger you to be inactive, describe how each cue affects you, and an alternative activity.

	Describe	Alternative activity plan
Lack of time		
Labor-saving devices		
Lack of facilities		
Lack of support		
Disruption of routine		

Cue Control

Instructions Instead of trying to tackle all of your cues for inappropriate eating or physical inactivity, you may find it helpful to identify your most troublesome cues. These are cues that are particularly damaging because they:

- Occur frequently.
- Cause you to eat a significant amount of excess calories each time the cues occur or cause you to consistently abandon your physical activity plans.
- Are difficult to avoid (such as business meetings over lunch).

List your two most troublesome cues in the chart below, then answer the following questions.

	Cue 1	Cue 2
Description		
How can I avoid this cue?		
If not avoidable, how can I adapt my response to this cue?		
What is the best solution for coping with this cue?		
What steps do I need to take to implement this solution?		
How will I know when I have successfully managed this cue?		

Keys to Managing Cues

- Identify the cues that are problems for you. You may find they are clustered in one type of environment (social, external, or internal) or are distributed throughout the different environments.
- Brainstorm ways to avoid or adapt to your problem cues.
- Identify realistic, measurable goals.
- Devise a plan for attaining those goals.
- Practice your plans. Revise them if necessary.

Alternative Activities

Instructions

In the space below, list activities that you enjoy, need to accomplish, or want to try. Keep this list in a handy place so you can refer to it easily whenever you are cued to eat or be sedentary.

External Cue: You find you tend to eat absentmindedly while watching television.

Elimination Strategy: Make it a rule to eat at the kitchen table. Ask family members to support you by eating only in the kitchen as well.

Internal Cue: You tend to eat inappropriately when you are bored.

Elimination Strategy: Find a new hobby, get more involved with your family and friends, or volunteer your time to a cause you believe in. Substitute physical activity for food—take a walk, dance, etc. Be careful not to become overly involved, because the stress it generates may cue you to overeat.

Examples of Cue Adaptation

Social Cue: Your job requires you to attend numerous receptions and cocktail parties.

Adaptation Strategy: Alcoholic beverages and rich hors d'oeuvres are usually abundant at cocktail parties, so you will need to plan carefully. You could: 1) consume seltzer water with a twist of lemon or other non-caloric beverage; 2) preplan that you will only have three hors d'oeuvres; 3) eat something on your food plan before going to the party and eat very little at the party; 4) carry your non-alcoholic drink in one hand and something else in the other—that way you won't have a free hand to reach for food when the trays of hors d'oeuvres come around.

External Cue: At least once a month, your family likes to eat out at a local all-you-can-eat pizza parlor.

Adaptation Strategy: Pizza can be part of your food plan. You could 1) decide before going how many slices you will allow yourself; 2) select pizza that has only vegetable toppings (limit meat toppings with high fat content); 3) ask for minimal cheese or scrape some of the cheese off to the side; 4) use a knife and fork to cut your pizza into small pieces instead of lifting the entire piece to your mouth for a big bite (this will help you slow down your eating); 5) load up on salad and vegetables (but watch the dressing!).

Internal Cue: You're home alone, and you're feeling down because you are lonely.

Adaptation Strategy: Recognize the true feeling—loneliness. Connect with friends or family by calling them, writing them a letter, or visiting them. Preplan time with friends or family to limit time alone.

Coping with Physical Inactivity Cues

Just as there are cues that encourage you to eat, there are cues that trigger you to remain sedentary or limit your physical activity. Viewed another way, the cues can become signals for increasing your activity.

Limit Internal Inactivity Cues

Lack of time is the most common reason people give for avoiding physical activity. Everyone has the same amount of time each day (24 hours). How is it some people find time to be physically active?

Usually, sedentary people haven't made physical activity a priority in their lives. Remember, ten "2-minute walks" done throughout the day will benefit you just as much as a single 20-minute workout. Work activity into your daily routine. Add more activity by writing down specific times of day when you will be physically active. Protect these times as you would any other important appointment. Being too tired and getting out of the exercise habit due to illness or injury are other common inactivity cues. Tiredness is self-defeating. Moderate activity actually boosts your energy level.

Build External Activity Cues

A pedometer can cue you to be more active. The average American takes a mere 3,000—5,000 steps a day. Start by tracking your steps and increasing by 500—1,000 with gradual increase to your goal. Checking your pedometer several times a day helps to keep you focused on your activity level and motivates you to add more activity to your daily routine. Below are some more ideas for building activity cues in your environment:

External Cue: Labor-saving devices like elevators, escalators, automobiles, snow blowers, power lawn mowers, and golf carts are designed to help you be more efficient and save you from expending energy.