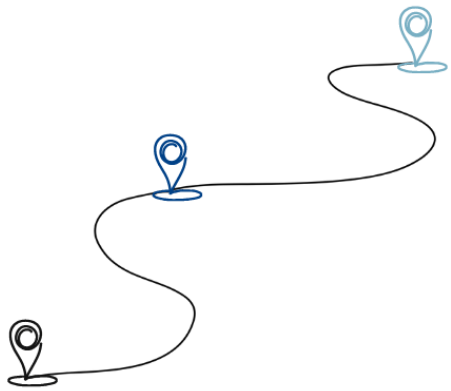
Binge Eating Basics

Introducing You to Binge Eating



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Chapter Goals

- Learn what binge eating is and how it is maintained
- Learn about a gold-standard treatment for binge eating
- Start to identify your own binge eating patterns

What is Binge Eating?



Food and beauty standards are everywhere. When living in such an environment, it is easy to eat more than we intend and to compare ourselves to other people. We can find ourselves **binge eating**, which is an uncontrolled form of eating and feeling bad about it—for example, feeling guilty. This isn't necessarily a bad thing and it can motivate us to make changes to our eating habits. However, this pattern can persist. **Binge eating disorder** is characterized by *continuous* uncontrolled eating and negative emotions in response to eating. It is often accompanied with body dissatisfaction. In addition, these episodes are distressing and/or negatively impact our lives in some way, such as work, relationships, sleep, and health. Millions of people experience at least one binge eating episode in their life.

Why binge eating sticks around and how to manage binge eating is the focus of this workbook. Binge eating disorder is a **psychological disorder**, which means that it is an *automatic* pattern of attending, thinking, feeling, and acting that is maintained in a *cycle* despite creating problems (Barlow, 2021; Bringmann et al., 2023). We want to highlight that binge eating disorder is automatic. People don't wake up in the morning and say, "You know what, I'm going to binge today." The cycle just

happens to them. A large body of research points to a set of factors that keep binge eating going, despite people wanting it to stop (Barlow, 2021).

Here's an example of a binge eating cycle. As you read, take note of anything with which you can relate. It's okay if you don't quite understand what is outlined here or if your situation is a bit different. Your therapist can help.

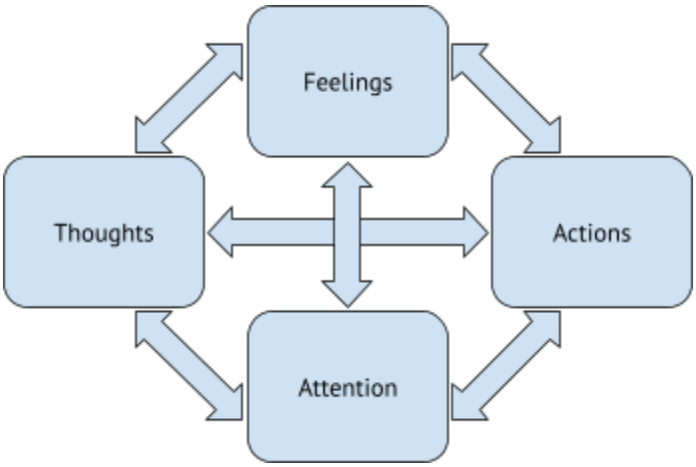
Those experiencing binge eating disorder often find themselves experiencing difficult emotions. With a history of using food to self-sooth—whether directly taught from family or indirectly through cultural messages—eating is an easy way to decrease negative feelings and even increase positive feelings. However, when left unchecked, this emotion regulation can lead to preoccupation with food and one's body, including their weight and shape. Although there are real social outcomes of being a certain weight or shape—sometimes people do experience rejection due to their body—these experiences start to cloud our judgments about ourselves and others. People may find themselves negatively judging themselves for not only their appearance, but for binge eating itself, for example, "I'm disgusting.", "I'm weak for not being able to stop." One way to deal with these feelings is to compensate. This may look like skipping meals, refusing to eat certain foods, or vomiting to name a few examples. Unfortunately, these compensatory behaviors only increase the likelihood of binge eating in the future—increased hunger drive—and fuel a sense of disdain and even hate towards oneself—"Why can't I be normal."

Despite this continuous and automatic cycle, we can still make changes. Many researchers and clinicians agree that identifying patterns of attending, thinking, feeling, and acting that keep us stuck and practicing new ways of responding can really help us bounce back from binge eating disorder and move us closer to a life worth living (Hofmann et al., 2012). Making changes can even be observed in our nervous system, which inherently responds to our environments and can be shaped by our experiences (Linden, 2006). However, we need to start by getting a better sense of your own experiences of binge eating.

Although there are common patterns across people, binge eating can look a little different from person to person, especially when considering the culture in which people live. Take a moment to write down your experience with binge eating: (1) when and where you binge eat the most, (2) how binge eating feels during and after—such as what you notice in your body, (3) what you tend to pay attention to on the days when you binge, (4) how or what you tend to think about before, during, or after binge eating, and (5) what you tend to do before and after a binge.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

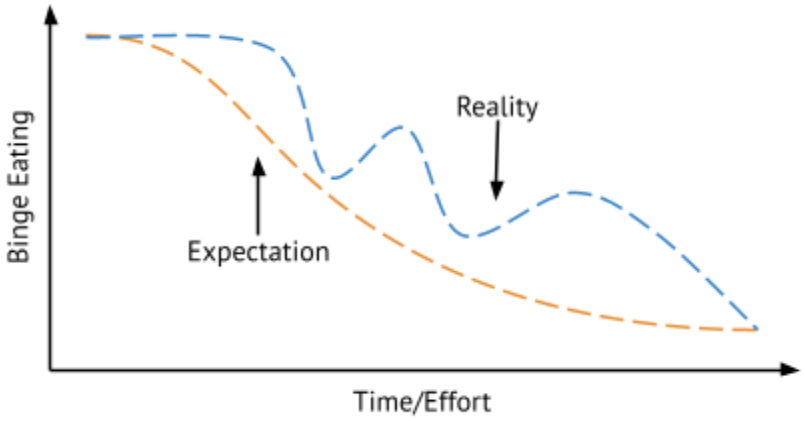
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has been adapted to treat different psychological disorders within different cultures (Naeem et al., 2019). It is considered a "gold-standard" treatment because it is the most effective and reliable treatment with enduring long-term benefits (David et al., 2018). The basic idea behind CBT is that different events can trigger different responses—attention, thoughts, feelings, and actions. This happens because at some point in our lives, we learned to respond to certain events in particular ways. We call this our "learned history," which includes our personal experiences as well as cultural expectations. These responses can actually impact one another and end up forming one's binge eating disorder. Characteristic responses of binge eating include:



- **Attention** - Towards food, weight, or shape
- **Thoughts** - "I'm disgusting.", "I can fix this by skipping the next meal."
- **Feelings** - Cravings towards food, distress, for example, disgust, shame
- **Actions** - Eating more than intended, skipping meals, restricting foods

How these responses are triggered and maintained is what you and your therapists will uncover together. Developing this understanding is what we call a **case formulation** and it directly informs what your treatment will look like.

It is helpful to have clear expectations through treatment. CBT can help you improve your binge eating by helping you notice the thoughts, feelings, actions, and attention that keep you stuck as well as guide you towards new ways of responding. However, CBT isn't guaranteed and there are a lot of factors that impact how successful someone may be—for example, how many sessions you have, how much effort you put into change, how supportive your environment is, etc. If you do see improvements, they likely won't be linear.



There are a number of what we call "core clinical change processes" that you and your therapists will consider when developing your **treatment plan**—for example, stimulus control, cognitive reappraisal, behavioral activation, mindful awareness, prolonged exposure, etc. A common change process used in binge eating treatment is mindful awareness (Kristeller et al., 2014), which entails noticing the present moment, including food, in a nonjudgmental and curious way. It can help someone be more intentional with food, as well as not become attached to

self-critical thoughts about one's weight or shape. Each process comes with different change techniques, which you could think of as different skills.

Keep in mind that CBT is an effortful process. It is imperative that once you learn a new technique/skill, you practice it over and over and over again. We want you to retain your new pattern of responding so that it—and not the disordered pattern—becomes automatic. You may find that you take two steps forward and one step back. This is normal. Change is hard and it takes time to develop new patterns. Try not to get too discouraged. Anything worth doing is typically hard. Remember, if you're ever having a hard time understanding anything in this workbook or doing the activities in this workbook, reach out to your therapist.

Illuminating Your Patterns

What we mean by that is, shine a big ol' light on your binge eating cycle. Really look at the events and subsequent responses—attention, thoughts, feelings, and actions—that keep you stuck. This process, which we call **self-monitoring**, can increase the likelihood of changing unproductive habits (Zhao et al., 2021). Put simply, we can't change something that we aren't aware of.

To do this, you will need to make note of five things: events, attention, thoughts, feelings, and actions. **Events** are the triggers for binge eating. Situations you are in can automatically trigger specific responses. These situations can be anything, such as being at a pot-luck, buffet, or bar. Sometimes these events are not about food, but about your weight and shape, such as seeing beauty messages

on social media. Triggers can also be various emotions that you may be experiencing. Sometimes we can change these events. More often than not, we are changing how you respond to them.

Attention is where your focus is. It is the built-in flashlight that we have. It is what you notice outside and inside your body. What we attend to can bias our cognitive processing. Do you find yourself overly focused on food or lack of control with food? Are you more likely to notice imperfections with your body than others would?	**Thoughts** are how you make sense of things that have happened. Sometimes how we perceive an event is more important than the event itself. For instance, what does it mean about you that you lost control with food? Does your mind tell you that you are bad in some way or should compensate by skipping the next meal?
Feelings are the sensations in your body. They are the body's way of telling us that something is amiss. However, feelings can be learned and removed from any actual problem. Feelings can be in the form of a craving, which feels a bit like tension. You may notice distress in various forms, for example, sadness, disgust, shame, etc.	**Actions** are the things you do to try to address or cope with the events or feelings. Binge eating is an obvious action, but this can trigger subsequent actions, especially if feeling bad after a binge. Compensatory behaviors include skipping meals, restricting certain "forbidden foods," vomiting, taking laxatives, etc.

See the next page for your first "Change Task," which outlines how to monitor your binge eating along with a helpful worksheet.





Change Task

Illuminate Your
Binge Eating Cycle

It is helpful to get in the habit of tracking the ebb and flow of your binge eating. So, what triggers your binge eating and what is your binge eating made of—your attention, thoughts, feelings, and actions? On the flip side, what makes your binge eating better? If you are unclear on whether something is a trigger or not, just write down what is going on when you are binge eating or just before you start binge eating. You can start to monitor your binge eating using the worksheet on the next page. It's helpful to get a couple weeks of data before you can start to see a pattern emerge. As you monitor, write down the events and responses as soon as you can. You may find that it is helpful to keep this workbook with you or jot down some notes on a piece of paper and then transfer your notes to this worksheet.

Self-Monitoring Worksheet

Events The triggers of your binge eating	**Attention** What you tend to notice or focus on	**Thoughts** How you make sense of different events	**Feelings** The sensations in your body	**Actions** How you cope with the event or feelings

Chapter Summary

You have learned quite a bit in this chapter. You learned:

1. that binge eating is a common response that isn't necessarily a problem,
2. that binge eating disorder is a cycle of binge eating that creates problems,
3. how cognitive-behavioral therapy can help,
4. what are reasonable expectations for progress,
5. the difference between events, attention, thoughts, feelings, and actions, and
6. the importance of knowing your binge eating cycle.

Your **change task** for the week is to write down when and where you are experiencing binge eating and any responses—attention, thoughts, feelings, and actions—while you are experiencing binge eating.

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