

Is it food noise or brain noise?

- "It's been a rough day"
- "I deserve it"
- "I need chocolate to feel better"
- "One won't hurt"
- "I earned it, I worked out every day this week"
- "If I don't eat this now, I'll eat even more later"
- "This will help me relax"
- "[Holiday/celebration] comes only once a year"
- "It will upset/disappoint [name] if I don't eat this"
- "I get back on track tomorrow"

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Quick Bio

- Faribault Allina Clinic
- I became interested in a dietetics career as a freshman in college d/t my mom's dietary struggles with ulcerative colitis as well as a desire to improve my own disordered eating patterns
- RDN since 1995
- Master's degree 2000
- University of Minnesota, Ski U Mah!

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What To Do When Willpower Won't Work

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Objectives: Today we will

- Define food cravings aka "food noise"
- Define willpower
- Identify when willpower works best, and when to not rely on it
- Identify working strategies to for times when willpower won't work.

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Cravings (AKA "food noise")

In psychology, a craving is an intense, often uncontrollable desire for a specific substance or experience.

- **Food cravings are driven by hormones:**
 - Physiologic factors (e.g., hunger, low blood sugar)
 - Psychologic factors (eg, need for pleasure, boost in mood, need for self-care).

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What triggers food cravings?

- External cues: seeing or smelling food
- Internal states: stress, fatigue, boredom
- Learned associations: "habit loops" eg, time of day, certain emotions, activities (driving, watching tv, sitting at computer, holidays, food pairs)
- The brain's job is to automate the tasks we do regularly to save energy, increase efficiency and free up mental resources for more complex thinking. This is how we form habits.
Habit loop—job stress --> craving --> drive thru --> eating --> relief

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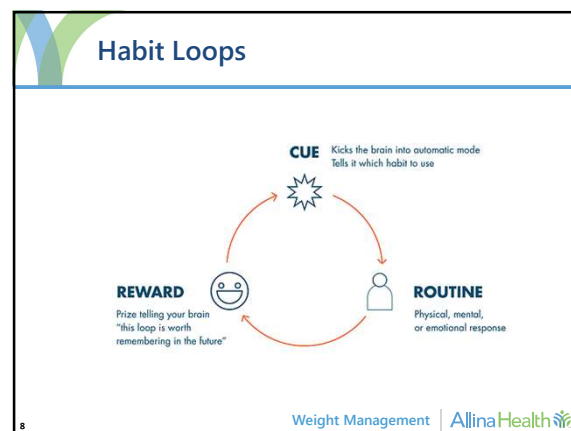
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Habit Loops & Automatic Thoughts

-  Habit loops trigger automatic thoughts, eg, "I need a cookie right now to feel better"
-  Automatic thoughts reinforce cravings by justifying them, eg, "One won't hurt, I've earned it"
-  Cravings can feel automatic and out of our control because they activate the brain's reward system, the release of dopamine, which makes us want to satisfy them immediately.

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Why do we crave food when we're emotional or exhausted?

- 1) The Brain is Wired to Seek Comfort & Rewards**
 - Dopamine Release:** Food, especially high-carb or high-fat foods, triggers dopamine (a "feel-good" hormone), giving a temporary mood boost.
 - Conditioning:** Over time, if eating has been associated with stress relief or comfort, the brain forms a habit loop—stress → craving → eating → relief.
- 2) Energy Depletion Lowers Self-Control**
 - Decision Fatigue:** When mentally exhausted, the brain struggles to make good choices, defaulting to easy, quick gratification (ultra processed foods).
 - Low Blood Sugar:** Physical exhaustion can lead to low blood sugar, making cravings stronger, especially for sugar and fast-digesting carbs.

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Why do we crave food when we're emotional or exhausted?

- 3) Stress & Cortisol Make You Crave Food**
 - Cortisol Response:** Stress increases cortisol levels, trigger hunger and cravings, particularly for comfort foods.
 - Fight-or-Flight Mode:** The body interprets stress as a survival threat, leading to increased appetite to store energy.
- 4) Emotional Eating as a Coping Mechanism**
 - Avoiding Negative Feelings:** Eating can serve as a distraction from stress, sadness, or frustration.
 - Comfort from Routine:** If eating has been a go-to emotional relief in the past, the habit reinforces itself.


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Can Willpower Break a Habit Loop?

Definition of Willpower

- The ability to delay gratification, resisting short-term temptations in order to meet long-term goals
- The capacity to override an unwanted thought, feeling, or impulse
- Conscious, effortful regulation of the self by the self (we have agency—not control!)



- A limited resource capable of being depleted

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Can Willpower Break a Habit Loop?

Willpower is highest:

- In the Morning** – After a good night's sleep, your brain is well-rested, and decision-making energy is at its peak.
- After Eating a Balanced Meal** – Eating protein and healthy fats helps maintain stable energy.
- Following Rest and Recovery** – Mental and physical exhaustion deplete self-control. Taking breaks, practicing mindfulness, or even short naps can restore willpower.
- When Motivation is Fresh** – Right after setting a goal or feeling inspired, your willpower spikes.
- In Low-Stress Situations** – Stress drains cognitive resources, making it harder to resist impulses.

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Willpower Depleters

- **Mental fatigue**
 - Cognitive load
 - Ego depletion
- **Physical fatigue**
 - Energy expenditure
 - Blood glucose levels
- **Emotional stress**
 - Dealing with negative emotions
 - Emotional regulation
- **Overwhelming decisions**
 - Decision fatigue
- **Unmet Needs**
 - Lack of sleep
 - Hunger
- **Negative or Unpleasant Tasks**
 - Avoiding unpleasant tasks
 - Task Aversion
- **Social and Environmental Pressure**
 - Peer Influence
 - Environmental Cues
- **Unrealistic Expectations or Goals**
 - Overambitious Goals
 - Perfectionism
- **Self-criticism and Guilt**
 - Self-doubt
 - Lack of Self-Compassion

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"When the pressure is on, you don't rise to the occasion; you fall to your highest level of preparation."

Chris Voss, former FBI hostage negotiator
Never Split the Difference

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Breaking the cycle with preparation!

1. Awareness: Identify your habit loops.
2. Alternative Coping: Find ways other than food to self-soothe
3. Balanced Nutrition: Ensure you are nourishing your weight loss and not just restricting calories.

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Emotional Eating

- **Awareness:** You when stressed, anxious, bored, sad, loneliness, frustration. You find reasons why you should reward yourself with craved foods or promise yourself you'll do better tomorrow.
- ✓ **Strategy:**
 - Identify the emotion and address it directly (journaling, deep breathing, talking to a friend).
 - Swap food with another comfort habit—tea, a short walk, music, or a quick stretching session.
 - Practice mindfulness: Before eating, ask, "Am I truly hungry, or do I need something else?" "Is this behavior (self-talk) sabotaging my success?" "What am I giving up when I say yes this craving?"
 - Keep in mind 80% of our self-talk is negative or untrue.

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"I must relentlessly refuse to participate in my own demise."

Dr Lee Warren, neurosurgeon
Hope is the First Dose

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Habitual & Environmental Triggers

- **Awareness:** Craving food at certain times of day, associating food with a place, needing something sweet after meals.
- ✓ **Strategy:**
 - Interrupt the routine: If you always eat something sweet after dinner take a walk instead.
 - Change your environment: Keep tempting foods out of sight and replace them with healthier options.
 - Brush your teeth after meals—this signals your brain that eating is done.

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A healthier option...



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Sensory Triggers

- **Awareness:** Cravings hit when you see someone else eat, drive past a restaurant, smell food in the mall, social situations/holidays make cravings worse.

✓ Strategy:

- **Avoid food cues when possible** (mute food ads, take a different route past restaurants).
- Use **"if-then" planning**: "If I see dessert, then I'll drink water and wait 10 minutes."
- **Keep tempting foods out of immediate reach—store them in opaque containers or in harder-to-reach places.**

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Gut Microbiome & Food Addiction Triggers

- **Awareness:** frequently craving sugary, processed, high fat foods; eating these foods make you want more rather than feeling satisfied; you've developed a strong attachment to certain processed foods.

✓ Strategy:

- **Reduce highly processed foods gradually to retrain your palate** (aim for 2-4 weeks).
- **Prioritize whole, minimally processed foods**—your gut bacteria will adjust over time.
- **Distract yourself when cravings hit:** Engage in an activity that shifts your focus for 5-10 minutes.

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Biological Triggers --> balance blood sugars & nutrients

Reduce cravings by following a balanced eating plan.

✓ Strategy:

- Eat **3 balanced meals** each day.
- Eat **protein and fiber** with healthy carbs at every meal for energy and to keep blood sugar stable.
- Stay **hydrated**—sometimes thirst feels like hunger.
- If you crave **salt**, try electrolyte-rich foods (avocados, nuts, bananas) instead of processed snacks.
- If you crave **sweets**, choose natural options like fruit, cinnamon, or dark chocolate.

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Bonus Strategy: The "Craving Disruptor Formula"

- 1 Pause** – Acknowledge the craving without acting on it.
- 2 Hydrate** – Drink a glass of water or herbal tea.
- 3 Engage** – Distract yourself with a non-food activity for 10-20 minutes.
- 4 Replace** – Choose a healthier alternative if the craving persists.

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Let's face it, we all need a plan.

- Food is not going away. There will always be holidays, vacations, a box of donuts in the breakroom, food focused events, birthday parties.
- Life is going to hand us lemons. Sometimes it's a serious loss, sometimes it's just the drip, drip, drip water torture of daily stresses, unwanted change, and annoyances. None of us escapes these things.
- When willpower is high, build systems to create an environment that makes it harder to default into old habit loops
- Think: "I want to be happy and healthy anyway"
- Remember your "why".

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