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*A Moment With Dr. Moore,  
our PhD Psychologist/  
Eating Behaviorist*

### Tips for the Holidays and Beyond

#### (Are you a Sneak-Eater?)

It's that time of year again! Christmas cookies, fudge, and leftovers, leftovers, leftovers. For some of us, managing our portions at holiday parties and dinners is a challenge. However, for others, these events aren't the problem. We find that we have amazing self-control when in the company of others. We often eat little, make healthy choices, and seldom go back for seconds. We are acutely aware of how others may judge our eating behavior, particularly since we struggle with our weight. But, once outside of the view of friends, family, or co-workers the eating begins.

As soon as you start eating, it feels like an urge takes over and you can't stop. You may rummage through the leftovers that call you from the kitchen or you may keep your own stash of "forbidden" foods. You may even stop at the drive thru so that you can eat out of the view of others. You may discard the evidence after you eat. You eat, and continue to eat, even once you begin to feel uncomfortable and the food stops tasting as good. You feel ashamed of your weight, your behavior, and your lack of control. You ask, "Why do I do this to myself?"

You may seek out food in the absence of physical hunger. Your eating is often triggered by strong negative emotions, such as sadness, boredom, restlessness, or rebellion. At times, food is the best reward or provides the most comforting escape.

If you are a "sneak eater," odds are you are an "emotional eater." Sneak eating is most often emotional eating that occurs out of the view of others. This type of emotional eating is often done in private because of feelings of shame and self-judgment that accompany turning to food for solace during difficult emotional times.

Even if you have turned to food for comfort in the past, there are ways to break this habit. You can feel more in control of your eating behavior, your weight, and your emotions!

Follow these scientifically proven strategies to break your sneak eating tendencies:

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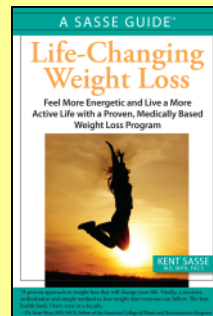
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#### **Doctor's Orders by Kent C. Sasse, M.D., MPH, FACS, Medical Director of iMetabolic**

**Read every label.** One of the successful strategies for changing behaviors is a concept called *mindfulness*. Being mindful can help you change your behavior without outside stimulus (or, perhaps, nagging) by becoming aware or mindful of the consequences of those behaviors (Vangness, 2005). Information leads to insight and a greater appreciation for the consequences of action. As a result, you're much more likely to change your behavior if you're paying attention. It's much harder to indulge in some high-calorie extravagance if you know exactly how many calories are lined up and looking to land in their favorite storage spots on your body.

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1. *Monitor, in a whole new way.* Many of us have kept food diaries in the past. Writing down what foods and how much you eat can be very helpful when we are trying to lose weight. However, when we're trying to break a sneak eating habit, this type of monitoring can place additional emphasis on "good" foods and "bad" foods and what we believe we "should" and "should not" eat. This can lead to feelings of deprivation, self-judgment, and feelings of failure. Instead, monitor your appetite at every meal (Craighead, 2006). Aim to eat 3 meals and 2 snacks a day, 2.5 to 3 hours apart. Keep feelings of deprivation low. Don't worry as much about what you eat. Focus on how you eat. Make a conscious decision to start eating when you become moderately hungry (3) and make a conscious decision to stop eating when you are moderately full (5). Take your head out of the game. Your mind can lead you astray; your stomach will never mislead you. Stop at the first sign of stomach distention. This is moderate fullness. Use the scale below as a guide. Mark an X at the starting and stopping point. Try to stay between 2.5 and 5 during each meal.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7

Too	Moderately	Moderately	Ignored
Hungry	Hungry	Full	Fullness

*Distinguish Psychological Hunger from Physical Hunger.* After regularly using the monitoring strategy above and eating regularly scheduled meals and snacks, in just a few short weeks you can learn to clearly recognize when your body is hungry and when it is full. With this clearer perspective, it will be easier to recognize psychological hunger. Psychological hunger develops in response to unmet needs and seldom is influenced by whether or not you just ate. It is separate from physical hunger. Psychological hunger may be triggered by a conflict with another, feelings of deprivation, or a strong need to feel better. Practice tuning in to your deprivation. If you are craving a certain type of food, engage in anti-deprivation eating. In other words, make a conscious decision to eat what you want without feeling guilty. This will help you prevent sneak eating later. If its not a particular food that you are craving, seek to identify your need. Are you missing pleasure in life? Do you feel like others are treating you unjustly? If you are upset with someone, write a note to help you figure out the best way to communicate your frustration to him or her. If you are feeling lonely, reach out to others for support and companionship. If you are feeling bored or feel that life lacks pleasure, identify a fun new hobby that can occupy your time like knitting, photography, or listening to music. Identify alternative habits that directly make you feel better! These positive coping habits make you feel better (for more than just the short term) and don't come with any guilt later! Remember, no amount of food can satisfy a psychological hunger.

2. *Challenge What the Heck Thoughts.* Once you begin recognizing physical hunger and psychological hunger, you may find that you are better able to reduce sneak eating on a fairly regular basis. However, when times are tough, you may find that you continue to give in to your old habits. The good news is, you have control over this behavior. Tune in to your thoughts that lead you to believe that sneak eating is okay. Challenge your denial and recognize that you *do*, in fact, care. Challenge your wishful thoughts that tell you eating will make you feel better. It never makes you feel better. It makes you feel worse. Stay tuned it. Don't let your mind create a smoke screen that says, "Oh, What the Heck? I've already blown it anyway." Every calorie that you consume counts. Challenge your magical thinking.

2. *Continued:* There is no point at which it doesn't matter anymore. Whenever you notice what you are doing and make a conscious decision to stop, you have made a choice to take care of you. Remember why this is important to you and that practicing today will make tomorrow easier. Remember, you are not getting away with anything, even though it feels like it. You are not hiding anything. Others know anyway. You are not rebelling against anyone but yourself. Challenge your unhelpful thoughts and stay focused on what's most important to you in the long run.

3. *Engage in Effective Emotional Eating.* Food has been associated with many things other than physical hunger in the past. All of us have eaten for celebration, for enjoyment, or to feel better. Commit to effective emotional eating as a coping strategy. This means, when you have exhausted all other options and nothing seems to help you feel better, you can eat with the goal of eating to feel better. However, engaging in effective emotional eating means making a commitment to yourself to staying mindful during your eating. This means tuning in and paying attention to how the food is making you feel (both physically and psychologically). Listen to your body and recognize the point of diminishing returns. This is the point at which eating no longer feels good. You begin to feel over-stuffed. You begin to notice that you will feel guilty and shameful for eating anymore. This is the point at which food has done all that it can do for you. You make a conscious decision to use food rather than abuse food by listening to your body and stopping at moderate fullness - no matter why you started eating.

Using the strategies regularly can help you develop a more positive relationship with food. This is a new skill. Many people have never thought about eating in this way. Have patience and compassion with yourself. Overtime, using these and other techniques, you can stop your sneak eating habit and turn to a number of health habits instead!