



The role of behavioural nutrition in preventing emotional eating among adults

Anisha Das¹, Souvik Tewari^{2*}

¹ Nutritionist, Nabajatak Child Development Centre, West Bengal, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of Food and Nutrition, Swami Vivekananda University, Barrackpore, West Bengal, India

Abstract

Emotional eating is a maladaptive eating behaviour characterized by the consumption of food in response to emotional states rather than physiological hunger. Increasing levels of stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness, and lifestyle-related pressures among adults have contributed significantly to the prevalence of emotional eating worldwide. Behavioural nutrition, an interdisciplinary field integrating nutrition science, psychology, and Behavioural sciences, has emerged as an effective approach for addressing emotional eating through sustainable dietary and lifestyle modifications. This review explores the concept of emotional eating, its psychological and physiological mechanisms, contributing risk factors, and the role of Behavioural nutrition in prevention and management among adults. Key Behavioural nutrition strategies including mindful eating, cognitive Behavioural therapy-based nutrition counseling, self-monitoring, emotional regulation training, stress management, healthy food environments, and nutritional education are discussed. The review also highlights the role of macronutrients, micronutrients, gut-brain interactions, and lifestyle interventions in reducing emotional eating behaviours. Current evidence suggests that Behavioural nutrition interventions can significantly improve emotional regulation, dietary quality, body weight management, and psychological well-being. Integrating Behavioural nutrition into public health programs and clinical practice may provide a sustainable strategy for preventing emotional eating and associated metabolic disorders among adults.

Keywords: Behavioural nutrition, emotional eating, mindful eating, stress eating, adult nutrition, eating behaviour, psychological health, obesity prevention

Introduction

Emotional eating refers to the tendency to consume food in response to emotions rather than biological hunger cues (Macht and Simons, 2010) [21]. Individuals experiencing emotional eating commonly consume highly palatable foods rich in sugar, fat, and calories during periods of stress, anxiety, sadness, loneliness, or boredom (Fuente González *et al.*, 2022) [12]. Emotional eating has become increasingly prevalent among adults due to modern sedentary lifestyles, work-related stress, social isolation, irregular dietary habits, and mental health challenges (Syed, 2020) [32]. Studies indicate that emotional eating contributes significantly to obesity, metabolic syndrome, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disorders, and psychological distress (Dakanalis *et al.*, 2023) [9].

Behavioural nutrition focuses on understanding how psychological, environmental, cognitive, and social factors influence dietary Behaviour. Unlike traditional nutrition approaches that emphasize only nutrient intake, Behavioural nutrition addresses eating habits, food choices, emotional triggers, self-regulation, and lifestyle patterns. Through evidence-based interventions, Behavioural nutrition helps individuals develop healthier coping mechanisms and sustainable eating Behaviours (Brug *et al.*, 2008) [5].

The relationship between emotions and food intake is complex and influenced by neurobiological pathways, hormonal responses, environmental cues, and learned Behaviours. Emotional eating often provides temporary psychological comfort but may eventually lead to guilt, overeating, poor diet quality, and chronic health complications. Preventing emotional eating requires multidimensional strategies involving nutrition education,

emotional awareness, stress management, and Behavioural modification techniques (Albardan and Platat, 2025) [3].

This review aims to discuss the role of Behavioural nutrition in preventing emotional eating among adults by examining psychological mechanisms, nutritional factors, Behavioural interventions, and evidence-based preventive approaches.

Understanding Emotional Eating

Emotional eating is characterized by eating in response to negative or positive emotions rather than physiological hunger signals. Common emotional triggers include stress, anxiety, anger, sadness, boredom, loneliness, frustration, and celebration. Emotional hunger is typically sudden, associated with cravings for specific comfort foods, and persists even after fullness is achieved (AkbarianFiroozabadi *et al.*, 2026) [31].

1. Types of Emotional Eating

Negative Emotional Eating

Negative emotional eating refers to the tendency to consume food as a coping mechanism in response to unpleasant emotions such as stress, sadness, anxiety, loneliness, anger, or depression rather than true physiological hunger (Rossi, 2025) [28]. Individuals experiencing emotional distress often crave highly palatable “comfort foods” rich in sugar, fat, and calories because these foods stimulate the brain’s reward system and temporarily increase the release of dopamine and serotonin, creating short-term feelings of pleasure and relief. Chronic stress also elevates cortisol levels, which can increase appetite and preference for energy-dense foods. Although emotional eating may provide temporary emotional comfort, repeated reliance on food for emotional regulation can lead to overeating, weight gain,

poor dietary habits, guilt, and an increased risk of obesity and metabolic disorders. Behavioural nutrition approaches such as mindful eating, stress management, emotional awareness, and cognitive behavioural strategies are therefore important in helping adults develop healthier coping mechanisms and reduce emotionally driven eating behaviours (Prabhakar *et al.*, 2026)^[36].

Positive Emotional Eating

Positive emotional eating refers to the consumption of food in response to pleasant emotions, rewarding experiences, or celebratory occasions rather than actual physiological hunger. This type of emotional eating commonly occurs during festivals, parties, family gatherings, achievements, vacations, or social events where food is strongly associated with enjoyment, comfort, social bonding, and happiness. Individuals may consume larger portions or indulge in high-calorie foods such as sweets, snacks, and fast foods as part of celebration and reward-related behaviour. Positive emotions can stimulate the brain's reward pathways, reinforcing pleasurable eating experiences and encouraging repeated overeating in similar situations (Shrivastava *et al.*, 2026)^[30]. Although occasional celebratory eating is considered socially normal, frequent positive emotional eating may contribute to excessive calorie intake, unhealthy eating habits, weight gain, and reduced dietary control over time. Behavioural nutrition strategies such as mindful eating, portion awareness, balanced food choices, and emotional self-regulation can help individuals enjoy social eating occasions while maintaining healthy dietary patterns (Díaz-Pichardo *et al.*, 2026)^[11].

2. Physiological Mechanisms

Stress activates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, leading to increased cortisol secretion. Elevated cortisol stimulates appetite and cravings for high-fat and high-sugar foods. Dopamine release during pleasurable eating further reinforces emotional eating Behaviours.

3. Psychological Factors

Psychological factors play a major role in the development and maintenance of emotional eating behaviours among adults. Individuals who experience poor emotional regulation often struggle to manage negative feelings effectively and may use food as a coping mechanism to obtain temporary comfort and relief. Mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression are strongly associated with increased cravings for high-calorie and sugary foods because eating can temporarily activate reward pathways in the brain and improve mood. Low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction may also contribute to unhealthy eating patterns, as individuals often experience guilt, shame, or negative self-perception related to body image and eating habits (Javadi *et al.*, 2026)^[14]. Childhood trauma and adverse life experiences can further influence emotional eating by creating long-term emotional distress and maladaptive coping behaviours (Yan *et al.*, 2026)^[25]. In addition, social isolation and loneliness may encourage overeating as a form of emotional compensation or comfort seeking. Chronic stress is another significant contributor, as prolonged stress increases cortisol secretion, stimulates appetite, and promotes cravings for energy-dense foods. Overall, individuals with impaired coping skills frequently rely on food for emotional regulation, highlighting the

importance of behavioural nutrition interventions that focus on emotional awareness, stress management, and healthy coping strategies (Pandey *et al.*, 2026)^[36].

Concept of Behavioural Nutrition

Behavioural nutrition is a multidisciplinary field combining nutrition science, psychology, public health, and Behavioural sciences to understand and modify eating Behaviours. It emphasizes sustainable dietary habits, motivation, cognitive restructuring, and lifestyle modifications rather than restrictive dieting (D'Amico, 2026)^[36].

Behavioural nutrition interventions aim to:

- Improve self-awareness regarding eating habits
- Identify emotional and environmental triggers
- Encourage mindful food choices
- Promote self-regulation and coping strategies
- Support long-term healthy Behaviours

Behavioural nutrition recognizes that food choices are influenced by emotions, social norms, cultural beliefs, food availability, stress levels, and learned experiences.

Relationship Between Behavioural Nutrition and Emotional Eating

Behavioural nutrition plays a significant role in preventing emotional eating by addressing the psychological, emotional, and environmental factors that influence food-related behaviours. Unlike conventional nutrition approaches that focus mainly on nutrient intake and calorie balance, behavioural nutrition emphasizes the development of healthy eating habits, emotional awareness, self-regulation, and sustainable lifestyle changes. Emotional eating often occurs when individuals use food as a coping mechanism for stress, anxiety, sadness, boredom, or other emotional disturbances, leading to excessive consumption of high-calorie comfort foods. Behavioural nutrition interventions help individuals recognize emotional triggers, differentiate between emotional hunger and physiological hunger, and develop healthier coping strategies such as mindful eating, stress management, physical activity, and emotional regulation techniques (Soni *et al.*, 2026)^[25]. Approaches including cognitive behavioural therapy-based nutrition counselling, self-monitoring of eating behaviours, nutrition education, and supportive lifestyle modifications can improve self-control, reduce impulsive eating, and promote positive relationships with food. By targeting maladaptive eating patterns and encouraging healthier emotional coping mechanisms, behavioural nutrition contributes significantly to the prevention of emotional eating, obesity, and associated metabolic and psychological disorders among adults (Çekal and Doğan *et al.*, 2026)^[25].

1. Mindful Eating Practices

Mindful eating involves paying conscious attention to hunger, satiety, taste, texture, and emotional states while eating. It encourages individuals to eat slowly, avoid distractions, and recognize emotional triggers before consuming food (Chauhan and Goyal, 2026)^[31].

Mindful eating interventions have shown improvements in:

- Emotional regulation
- Portion control
- Reduced binge eating
- Better dietary quality
- Increased satiety awareness

Mindfulness reduces impulsive eating by improving awareness of physiological hunger signals.

2. Cognitive Behavioural Nutrition Therapy

Cognitive Behavioural approaches help individuals identify dysfunctional thoughts and beliefs associated with food and emotions. Nutrition counseling integrated with cognitive Behavioural therapy (CBT) helps adults (Klainin-Yobas and Kaushalya, 2026)^[20]:

- Recognize emotional triggers
- Challenge negative thought patterns
- Develop healthy coping skills
- Improve self-control around food

Behavioural interventions based on CBT have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing emotional eating and obesity-related Behaviours.

3. Self-Monitoring and Food Journaling

Keeping food diaries and emotional tracking records helps individuals identify associations between mood and eating Behaviour. Self-monitoring improves accountability and awareness regarding (Choi *et al.*, 2026)^[8]:

- Emotional triggers
- Frequency of overeating
- Food cravings
- Eating environments

Tracking emotional states alongside dietary intake can significantly reduce impulsive eating episodes.

4. Stress Management Techniques

Stress is considered one of the strongest predictors of emotional eating because prolonged psychological stress increases cortisol secretion, stimulates appetite, and promotes cravings for high-fat, high-sugar comfort foods (Atar, 2026)^[31]. Individuals under chronic stress often use eating as a coping mechanism to achieve temporary emotional relief and relaxation. Behavioural nutrition interventions therefore emphasize stress management techniques as an important strategy for preventing stress-induced eating behaviours. Practices such as deep breathing exercises, yoga, meditation, and relaxation training help calm the nervous system, improve emotional regulation, and reduce anxiety and psychological tension. Regular physical activity further supports stress reduction by stimulating the release of endorphins, improving mood, and enhancing overall mental well-being. In addition, maintaining proper sleep hygiene is essential because inadequate sleep disrupts appetite-regulating hormones such as leptin and ghrelin, increasing hunger and food cravings. Together, these stress management approaches help lower cortisol levels, reduce emotional distress, and improve self-control around food, thereby decreasing the likelihood of emotional and impulsive eating among adults (Kipping *et al.*, 2026)^[25].

Nutritional Factors Influencing Emotional Eating

1. Macronutrient Composition

Macronutrient composition significantly affects appetite control, mood regulation, and emotional eating behaviours. Balanced meals containing complex carbohydrates, lean proteins, and healthy fats help maintain stable blood glucose levels and support emotional stability throughout the day (Javadi *et al.*, 2026)^[18]. Complex carbohydrates such as

whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and legumes promote gradual glucose release and support serotonin production, which may improve mood and reduce stress-related cravings. Lean proteins enhance satiety and regulate appetite hormones, thereby reducing impulsive eating and overeating tendencies. Healthy fats, particularly omega-3 fatty acids found in nuts, seeds, and fatty fish, contribute to brain health and may help reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression. On the other hand, irregular eating patterns, excessive consumption of refined carbohydrates, and nutrient deficiencies may increase hunger, cravings, fatigue, irritability, and emotional instability, ultimately promoting emotional eating behaviours. Therefore, maintaining a balanced macronutrient intake is an essential component of behavioural nutrition strategies aimed at preventing emotional eating among adults (Pandey *et al.*, 2026)^[25].

Protein

Protein plays a crucial role in appetite regulation, satiety enhancement, and the prevention of emotional eating behaviours. Protein-rich foods such as legumes, eggs, dairy products, lean meat, fish, soy products, and nuts help promote feelings of fullness by slowing gastric emptying and stabilizing blood glucose levels. Adequate protein intake also influences appetite-regulating hormones, including reducing ghrelin, the hormone responsible for stimulating hunger, while increasing peptide YY and glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1), which promote satiety and reduce food cravings (Karaman *et al.*, 2026)^[30]. Stable satiety levels may help individuals avoid impulsive snacking and emotional overeating, particularly during periods of stress or emotional distress. In addition, protein supports neurotransmitter synthesis, including dopamine and serotonin production, which are associated with mood regulation and emotional well-being. Therefore, incorporating sufficient protein into daily meals is considered an important behavioural nutrition strategy for improving appetite control, maintaining emotional stability, and reducing the likelihood of emotional eating among adults (Kanter *et al.*, 2026)^[25].

Complex Carbohydrates

Complex carbohydrates play an important role in maintaining mood stability, energy balance, and appetite regulation, thereby helping to reduce emotional eating behaviours. Foods such as whole grains, oats, brown rice, fruits, vegetables, legumes, and other fibre-rich foods provide a slow and steady release of glucose into the bloodstream, preventing rapid fluctuations in blood sugar levels that may trigger irritability, fatigue, and food cravings. Complex carbohydrates also support the production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter associated with feelings of calmness, relaxation, and emotional well-being. Increased serotonin synthesis may help improve mood stability and reduce stress-related cravings for sugary and high-calorie comfort foods (Atar, 2026)^[31]. Additionally, dietary fibre enhances satiety, delays gastric emptying, and promotes better digestive health, which can help individuals feel fuller for longer periods and avoid impulsive snacking. Therefore, the inclusion of complex carbohydrates and fibre-rich foods in daily diets is considered an effective behavioural nutrition strategy for supporting emotional regulation and preventing emotional eating among adults.

Healthy Fats

Healthy fats play a vital role in brain function, emotional regulation, and overall mental well-being, making them important components in the prevention of emotional eating. Sources of healthy fats such as nuts, seeds, avocados, olive oil, and fatty fish provide essential fatty acids that support neurological health and hormone regulation (Abeyesundara *et al.*, 2026) ^[1]. In particular, omega-3 fatty acids, including eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), possess anti-inflammatory properties and are associated with improved mood, reduced anxiety, and better cognitive function (Khabir *et al.*, 2026) ^[17]. Chronic inflammation has been linked with stress, depression, and emotional instability, all of which may contribute to emotional eating behaviours. Omega-3 fatty acids may also influence neurotransmitter activity, including serotonin and dopamine pathways, which are important for emotional balance and stress management. Furthermore, healthy fats contribute to prolonged satiety and help reduce excessive hunger and cravings for unhealthy comfort foods. Therefore, incorporating adequate amounts of healthy fats into daily dietary patterns is considered an important behavioural nutrition strategy for supporting emotional health and reducing emotionally driven eating behaviours among adults (Pandey *et al.*, 2026) ^[25].

Gut-Brain Axis and Emotional Eating

The gut-brain axis refers to bidirectional communication between the gastrointestinal system and the brain. Gut microbiota influence neurotransmitter production, mood regulation, appetite control, and stress responses. Dietary patterns rich in probiotics, prebiotics, fruits, vegetables, and fermented foods positively affect gut health and emotional regulation. Dysbiosis may contribute to anxiety, depression, and emotional eating tendencies (Shen *et al.*, 2026) ^[25].

Behavioural Interventions for Preventing Emotional Eating

1. Nutrition Education

Nutrition literacy improves understanding of:

- Hunger versus emotional cravings
- Balanced meal planning
- Portion control
- Reading food labels
- Healthy snacking strategies

Educational interventions increase confidence in making healthier dietary choices.

2. Physical Activity

Physical activity plays an important role in preventing emotional eating by improving psychological well-being, reducing stress, and promoting healthier coping mechanisms. Regular exercise stimulates the release of endorphins, serotonin, and dopamine, which are neurotransmitters associated with feelings of happiness, relaxation, and emotional satisfaction (Khati *et al.*, 2026) ^[18]. These positive effects on mood can help reduce the tendency to use food as a source of comfort during periods of stress, anxiety, or sadness. Physical activity also lowers cortisol levels, thereby decreasing stress-induced cravings for high-calorie and sugary foods. In addition to its physiological benefits, regular exercise is associated with improved self-esteem, body image, confidence, and

emotional regulation, all of which contribute to healthier eating behaviours and better mental health (Rawat, 2026) ^[36]. Activities such as walking, jogging, yoga, cycling, strength training, and aerobic exercises can serve as effective alternatives to emotional eating by providing stress relief and emotional balance. Therefore, incorporating regular physical activity into behavioural nutrition interventions is considered an essential strategy for reducing stress-related eating behaviours and promoting overall health among adults.

3. Sleep Management

Sleep management is an important component of behavioural nutrition because adequate sleep plays a crucial role in regulating appetite, emotional stability, and eating behaviours (Zahrani and Zomorodi, 2026) ^[36]. Sleep deprivation disrupts the balance of hunger-regulating hormones, particularly by decreasing leptin, the hormone responsible for promoting satiety, and increasing ghrelin, which stimulates hunger and appetite. As a result, individuals who experience insufficient or poor-quality sleep are more likely to develop cravings for energy-dense foods rich in sugar, fat, and refined carbohydrates. Lack of sleep also contributes to fatigue, irritability, stress, and impaired emotional regulation, which may further increase the risk of emotional eating and impulsive food choices (Puspikawati *et al.*, 2026) ^[25]. Behavioural nutrition interventions therefore emphasize healthy sleep hygiene practices such as maintaining consistent sleep schedules, reducing screen exposure before bedtime, managing stress, and creating a comfortable sleep environment to support proper appetite regulation and emotional well-being. Adequate sleep not only improves metabolic health and cognitive function but also helps individuals maintain better control over eating behaviours and reduce emotionally driven food consumption (Hall, 2026) ^[30].

4. Social Support

Social support plays a significant role in preventing emotional eating by promoting emotional well-being, motivation, and adherence to healthy lifestyle behaviours. Support from family members, friends, peers, healthcare professionals, and community or support groups can help individuals manage stress, improve self-confidence, and develop healthier coping strategies instead of relying on food for emotional comfort (Topor *et al.*, 2006) ^[33]. Positive social relationships provide encouragement, accountability, and emotional reassurance, which may reduce feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression commonly associated with emotional eating behaviours. Guidance from nutritionists, psychologists, and healthcare professionals can further assist individuals in identifying emotional triggers, improving dietary habits, and maintaining long-term behavioural changes. Participation in group counseling sessions, wellness programs, or peer-support communities also creates a sense of belonging and shared experience, helping individuals stay motivated and emotionally supported during lifestyle modifications. Therefore, strengthening social support systems is considered an important behavioural nutrition strategy for reducing emotional distress, improving psychological resilience, and encouraging sustainable healthy eating behaviours among adults (Rand *et al.*, 2017) ^[26].

Emotional Eating and Obesity

Emotional eating is strongly associated with overweight and obesity because individuals experiencing emotional distress often consume excessive amounts of calorie-dense foods rich in sugar, fat, and refined carbohydrates. Emotional eating can impair normal appetite regulation and reduce an individual's ability to recognize physiological hunger and satiety signals, leading to overeating and frequent snacking even in the absence of true hunger. Adults with obesity commonly report higher levels of emotional eating, stress, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, suggesting a close interaction between psychological health and unhealthy eating behaviours. Chronic emotional eating may also contribute to metabolic complications such as insulin resistance, dyslipidemia, hypertension, and increased risk of type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular diseases (Javadi *et al.*, 2026) ^[14]. Behavioural nutrition interventions targeting emotional eating focus on identifying emotional triggers, improving coping mechanisms, enhancing self-regulation, and promoting balanced dietary habits and lifestyle modifications. These interventions may support effective weight management, reduce binge eating episodes, improve metabolic health, and enhance psychological well-being by encouraging healthier relationships with food and better emotional control. Therefore, behavioural nutrition is considered an important strategy in obesity prevention and long-term health promotion among adults (Vasileiou and Abbott, 2023) ^[34].

Future Perspectives

Future research in behavioural nutrition and emotional eating should focus on developing more personalized and evidence-based interventions that address the unique psychological, social, and biological factors influencing eating behaviours among adults. Personalized behavioural nutrition approaches using individual dietary patterns, emotional profiles, lifestyle habits, and metabolic responses may improve the effectiveness of emotional eating prevention strategies. Advancements in digital health technologies, including wearable devices, mobile applications, and real-time emotional eating monitoring systems, can support self-awareness and early intervention. Mobile-based mindfulness and stress management programs may provide accessible and cost-effective tools for improving emotional regulation and healthy eating practices. In addition, artificial intelligence-assisted dietary counseling has the potential to deliver customized nutritional guidance, behavioural feedback, and motivational support to individuals at risk of emotional eating. Emerging research on the gut-brain axis and gut microbiome-targeted therapies may further contribute to understanding the biological relationship between emotional health and eating behaviour. Future cross-cultural studies are also needed to examine how cultural beliefs, social norms, and lifestyle patterns influence emotional eating behaviours in different populations. The integration of behavioural nutrition into primary healthcare systems, mental health services, and workplace wellness programs may significantly improve long-term dietary habits, psychological well-being, obesity prevention, and overall health outcomes among adults.

Conclusion

Behavioural nutrition plays a crucial role in preventing emotional eating among adults by addressing psychological,

emotional, and environmental determinants of eating Behaviour. Emotional eating is influenced by stress, mood disturbances, neurobiological mechanisms, and unhealthy coping patterns. Behavioural nutrition interventions such as mindful eating, cognitive Behavioural therapy, self-monitoring, stress management, nutrition education, and healthy lifestyle modifications have demonstrated significant effectiveness in reducing emotional eating Behaviours. A comprehensive Behavioural nutrition approach not only improves dietary quality and emotional regulation but also contributes to obesity prevention, metabolic health, and psychological well-being. Integrating Behavioural nutrition into healthcare systems, public health programs, and community interventions may provide sustainable solutions for managing emotional eating and promoting overall health among adults.

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