

Morelife UK Emotional Eating Group Intervention Pilot: Three Case Studies

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Introduction

Emotional eating is a common behaviour, often linked to mental health issues in those living with obesity¹. Morelife UK provides weight management services across the UK and provides therapeutic support as part of their specialist interventions. Evidence-based psychotherapeutic approaches to address emotional eating and weight management are limited, and Morelife clients shared their difficulties in accessing those services.

Methods

A significant proportion of clients struggle with emotional eating, which is a barrier to their weight loss. MoreLife clinicians (Counselling Psychologist, Dietitian) and therapists co-created a group-based programme with clients to help them with their emotional eating and improve their relationship with food. The programme consisted of 8 weekly, 90 minute sessions with 6-8 participants. The programme was offered to clients who were struggling with emotional eating and had symptoms of depression and/or anxiety.

The participants of this pilot programme were invited to give feedback on their experiences of the programme via weekly feedback forms. They also provided written responses to our comprehensive Case Example questions.

Results

This pilot had five cohorts and 20 completers in total. Three clients volunteered to be a case study. All the other participants shared their feedback via client feedback form.

Case A - Female, 53 years old

"I realised that I was bingeing due to a trauma that happened 45 years ago and realised it with the help of this programme and group. The programme and the group helped me to deal with this and start to put this issue to bed. I've started to ask myself questions before indulging. Am I hungry? Am I thirsty? I'll make a warm drink (not coffee). If that doesn't help I'll do the washing or ironing to take my mind off bingeing. I'll continue to do this as I'm finding it helpful. I currently still binge- but no way near as often.

The programme content can touch on raw emotions, dig up thoughts and feelings that have been locked away without you realising. Along with the therapist's gentle manner and questioning technique, the openness and friendliness of the group makes you feel like you're actually amongst friends. Where you can comment, question or compliment and not be embarrassed or judged for doing so."

Case B - Female, 38 years old

"I am not measuring my weight, as I can see the difference, my body toning up. I haven't binge for four months. I regularly flick through my notes from the programme and do my regular wellness check in as I learned from the programme. My eating patterns have changed a lot. I now aim for regular meals including breakfast, I am snacking less during the day. I haven't had a binge for four months; this is down from every other day which is massive improvement. I try to drink something instead of reaching for a snack. I regularly build time into my week to do a wellness check in. This can include meditating, puzzles, no tech time, write down how am doing mentally, addressing anything that may be bothering me.

I've talked to my partner about my 'secret' binges and feel I don't need to hide them. I pause when eating, e.g., halfway through a bag of crisps, and ask myself if I want it. I can also try to leave some at the bottom of the bag and not feel guilty for wasting food. My relationships with people have improved as I am more outgoing rather than withdrawn. I've done some volunteering with Parkrun and am thinking of doing some courses/ education because am more confident. I know that I am not alone, and I shouldn't feel ashamed. I know there is help out there, and people are willing to help."

Case C - Male, 58 years old

"I don't use food as an emotional crutch anymore. I see it as an enjoyable experience, a necessity to survive, but not something to turn to in times of stress, as I did previously. I learned coping mechanisms on the course and how to use mindfulness, which is far more helpful than a full packet of biscuits, and the results are more sustained.

I use the mindful apps I downloaded during the course, I don't use food diaries anymore as I don't snack, and I look at the nutritional value of the food I eat. I may often fancy a piece of carrot cake but in reality, when the cake is in front of me, I actually don't want it. I only eat when I am hungry. Eating to feel better when stressed does not affect the causes of the stress, yet taking five minutes on your own to reflect, use the meditation techniques learned or the mindfulness app is more productive and will be of greater benefit.

The mindfulness and meditation techniques learned are beneficial for your overall mental health, also the added benefit of losing weight boosts your confidence and self-esteem. I have gone from 126kg in 2021 to 78kg in December 2023. I am more body positive. I do not cover up on holidays and in the pool, I feel confident going to the gym. The positive effects of exercise also help release those 'happy hormones.'

Conclusion

This qualitative feedback adds to the limited literature on effectively treating emotional eating as part of a weight management programme. These case study examples emphasise the effectiveness of evidence-based psychotherapeutic approaches to address emotional eating and weight loss.

The overall feedback highlights that this pilot programme effectively reduces emotional eating and improves the participants' emotion regulation skills. The feedback points out enhanced self-awareness, acceptance, self-monitoring, and mindfulness. Participants noted that their self-esteem and confidence have improved, and they have started exploring new opportunities, such as employment. The programme also helped them lose weight. Future research is needed to evaluate the long-term impacts of this programme.