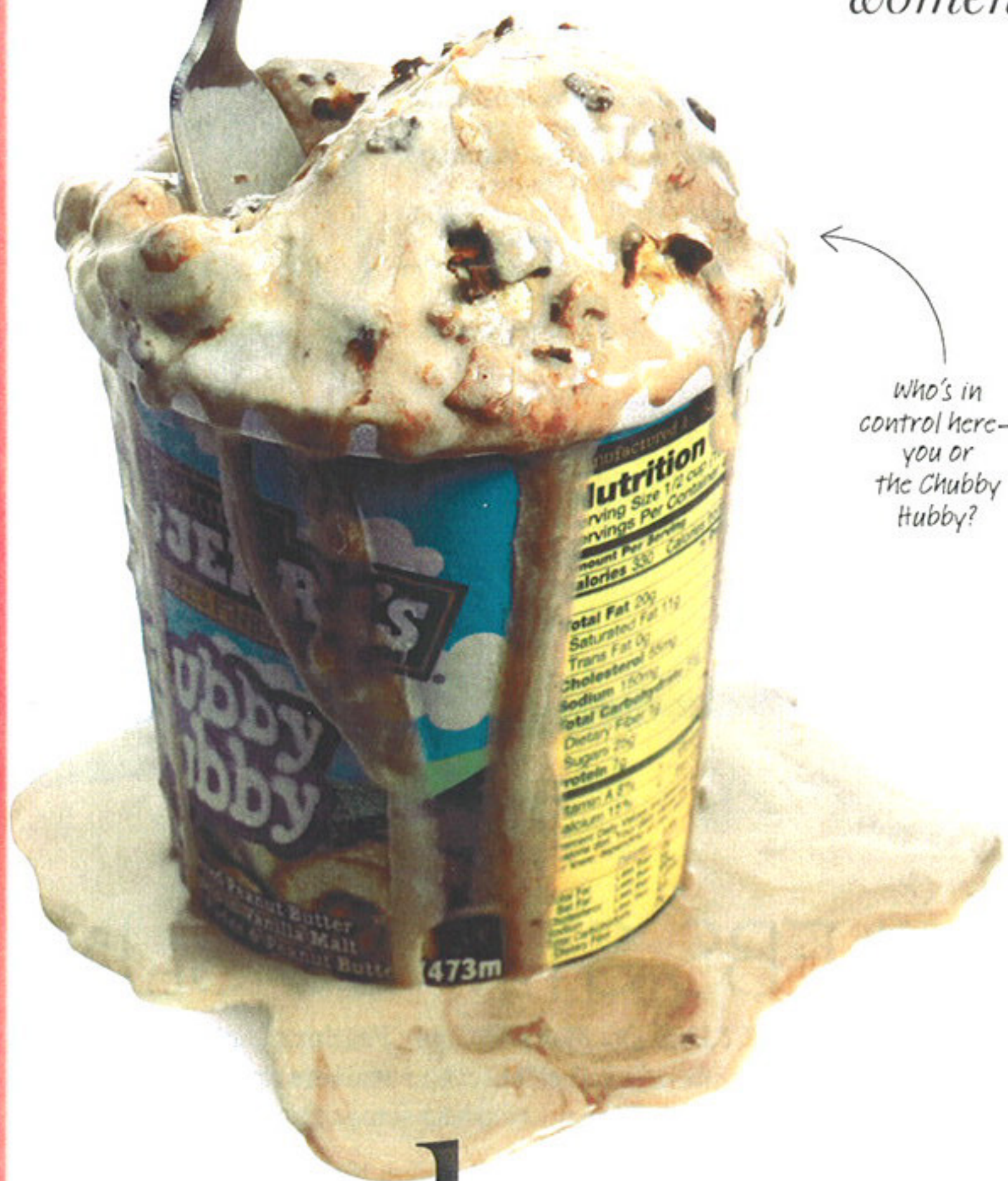


The female diet trap

“Emotional eating” stops many women from reaching their healthiest weight. Here’s your way out.



Who's in control here— you or the Chubby Hubby?

how successful you'll be at losing weight may depend on how you answer this question. Look at the photo above: Does it make you want to treat yourself to a few scoops—or down a pint because you're stressed?

Emotional eating—by definition, eating for psychological factors, not because you're hungry—is one of the leading reasons many women struggle with extra pounds, experts say. “To get a handle on a weight problem, you've got to look at the feelings behind it,” says Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Yale University and author of *Eating, Drinking, Overthinking*. While some emotional eaters indulge when happy or excited (“Hey, let's celebrate with a slice of cheesecake!”), many more eat when sad, stressed, lonely or angry (“Ugh, I could eat an entire cheesecake”). In one study a group of women ate 23 percent more than they normally would after a blow to their self-esteem.

Why is food such a comfort? “When you're eating, you can escape reality,” says Nolen-Hoeksema, “and just focus on the physical sensations, not

your problems.” There also may be a biological reason. Food alters the brain's chemistry the instant it touches the taste buds. “Many foods, carbohydrates in particular, are natural antidepressants, boosting serotonin levels and making you feel both relaxed and revived,” says Judith J. Wurtman, Ph.D., coauthor of *The Serotonin Power Diet*. And when we eat—especially if we binge—our bodies release dopamine, a pleasure chemical. Of course, the good feelings don't last. “Afterward, it backfires,” says Nolen-Hoeksema. “Not only are your original problems still there, but you feel bad about overeating, too.”

We all occasionally nosh when stressed or lonely. Nothing wrong with that. But here's how to know if you've crossed into problem territory—and what to do about it.

Get out your food diary

Experts agree that the first step is documenting your habits. “Since emotional eating can be automatic, you may not even be aware of it,” says Cynthia Bulik, Ph.D., professor of psychiatry and nutrition at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Write down everything you eat in a daily journal, along with how hungry you are, whether you're alone and what you're thinking and feeling. After two weeks, notice how often you eat when not hungry, due to negative feelings, in secret or until uncomfortably stuffed. “If you have one episode, you may decide you don't have a problem,” Bulik says. If it happens more frequently, you'll need to tackle these issues to reach a healthier weight.

For that, there's great news: Experts say any emotional eater can bust the habit. First, keep writing in your food journal, Bulik recommends. Pay close attention to what you write after you overeat—can you detect any patterns? Analyzing a diary helped Indianapolis Web developer Jennette Fulda, 27, lose 195 pounds. “I realized that I was turning to food when I felt out of control in other areas,” she says. “When I felt overwhelmed, I could always find happiness in a box of Ho Hos.”

Create a diversion

Once you know *why* you overeat, you need a counter-attack. Mark Leary, Ph.D., (*continued on page 77*)

23%
HOW MUCH MORE WOMEN MAY EAT WHEN THEY FEEL DOWN.



**"I lost
85 pounds"**

MY HAPPY WEIGHT
145 pounds

"I lost 60 pounds on an extreme diet that left me bulimic. But it wasn't until I got help and focused on improving my whole life—not just my body—that I was able to lose the excess weight and truly get healthy."

—TRISH BALBERT, 30, 5'6"

(continued from page 72) professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University, recommends writing down several non-food-related things that make you feel good (reading, watching reality TV, getting a massage, whatever) and posting the list prominently on your fridge. "Whenever you have the urge to comfort yourself by eating, turn to your list," Leary says. All the better if you put exercise in your top five—it has been shown to provide an endorphin high. "If you can deal with your triggers, you won't feel the need to self-medicate with food," says Nolen-Hoeksema.

Don't go it alone

You'll have better luck kicking emotional eating if you ask for help, whether it's from a therapist, weight loss group, or friends and family, experts say. "It's often empowering just to know you're not in this alone," says Nolen-Hoeksema. For Fulda, starting a blog, pastaqueen.com, about her food issues connected her to other women who'd had similar experiences. "They supported me and helped me understand my habits," she says. "It really helped."

And if you do fall prey to a cheesy pizza slice—or five—after a hard day, cut yourself some slack. Forgiving one binge may actually prevent you from eating more, Leary's research suggests. "Winning the war doesn't mean winning every battle, it means keeping at it," Fulda says. "I just take it day by day and celebrate the small victories, one cupcake at a time." ©

—SARA REISTAD-LONG



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