



The Psychology behind Comfort Food

Ashika Sai Manohar

Abstract:

Comfort food is widely consumed for its perceived emotional and psychological benefits, but the motives people report are not always the motives that actually drive their eating behavior. This paper examines how expectations about comfort food (e.g., pleasure, mood repair, boredom relief, and cognitive enhancement) relate to real patterns of comfort eating, and explores the role of social connection, attachment style, and chronic distress such as pain or stress. Recent evidence from survey and experimental studies suggests that although people strongly endorse pleasure and positive feelings as reasons for comfort eating, the frequency of comfort food consumption is more reliably predicted by expectations related to alleviating boredom, managing negative affect, and supporting social belonging, especially among securely attached individuals and those coping with chronic pain. These findings highlight comfort food as a multidimensional coping strategy and point toward interventions that target underlying emotional and social needs rather than focusing solely on willpower or dietary restraint.

Received 08 Apr., 2026; Revised 12 Apr., 2026; Accepted 18 Apr., 2026 © The author(s) 2026.
Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

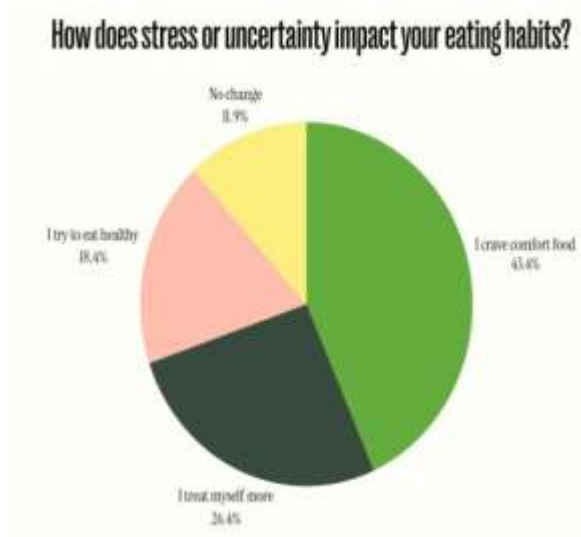
I. Introduction:

Comfort foods are typically described as foods that produce a sense of well-being, often through nostalgia, emotional soothing, or reassurance. They are frequently high in sugar, fat, or refined carbohydrates, such as chocolate, chips, ice cream, and sweet baked goods, and are commonly chosen during periods of stress, loneliness, sadness, or boredom.

In everyday language, people claim they eat comfort food “for pleasure” or “as a treat,” but psychological research suggests a more complex picture. Studies indicate that expectations about comfort food include not only hedonic reward but also emotion regulation, boredom relief, cognitive functioning, and social connection, and that these expectations relate in different ways to how often people actually eat comfort foods. Understanding these mechanisms is increasingly important because comfort eating has been linked to weight gain, metabolic risk, and poorer long-term health, particularly in vulnerable groups such as individuals with chronic pain or high stress.

The present paper synthesizes recent findings on the psychology of comfort food, with three main aims. First, it reviews research on expectations about comfort eating, including a 2025 online survey that distinguished five expectation domains and tested their association with eating frequency. Second, it examines evidence on social and attachment-related processes, where

comfort foods can function as “social surrogates” that symbolically restore belonging when relationships feel threatened. Third, it considers chronic states such as stress, boredom, and chronic pain, highlighting groups for whom comfort eating becomes a repeated coping strategy rather than an occasional indulgence. Together, these strands of evidence clarify why comfort food consumption often becomes habitual and why interventions need to address emotional and social drivers, not only dietary choices.

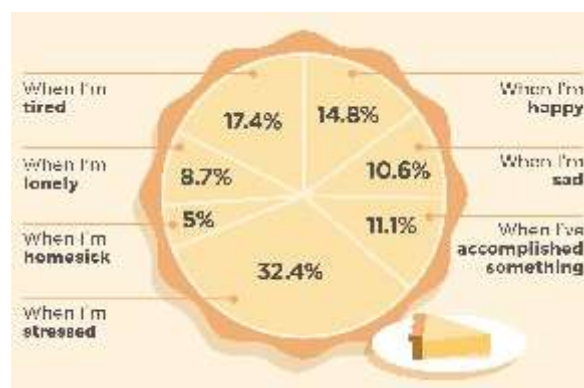


MAIN BODY:

Theoretical background: Emotion, reward, and expectation,

From a psychological perspective, comfort eating can be understood through models of emotion regulation, reward learning, and expectancy theory. Emotion regulation frameworks propose that people use behaviors such as eating to down-regulate negative affect or to up-regulate positive emotions, especially when they lack more adaptive coping strategies like problem solving or social support seeking. Reward-based models emphasize that high-palatability foods stimulate dopaminergic and opioid pathways associated with pleasure and reinforcement, which can strengthen the association between emotional cues (e.g., feeling lonely) and eating behavior over time.

Expectancy theory adds an important layer by highlighting that what people believe food will do for them shapes their choices and habits. Recent work has operationalized comfort food expectations into several domains, including managing negative affect, pleasurable and rewarding feelings, enhancing cognitive competence (e.g., feeling more alert or focused), alleviating boredom, and promoting positive emotions more generally. These expectations can be measured and compared with actual patterns of comfort eating to see which beliefs genuinely motivate behavior and which remain more aspirational or symbolic. Methods used to study comfort eating. Research on comfort eating uses a mix of cross-sectional surveys, experimental paradigms, and daily diary designs. Cross-sectional online surveys typically ask participants to identify their preferred comfort foods, rate how often they consume them, and indicate how strongly they endorse various expected outcomes (e.g., boredom relief, emotional comfort). In a 2025 study with more than 200 participants, expectations were grouped into five domains, and statistical analyses examined which domains predicted self-reported frequency of comfort eating.



Experimental studies often expose participants to situational triggers such as social exclusion, induced stress, or boredom, and then measure changes in comfort food preference, intake, or cravings. For example, some studies manipulate belongingness threat (e.g., recalling a time of social rejection) and then assess willingness to consume comfort foods, perceived taste, or

feelings of loneliness after eating or even imagining eating those foods. Daily diary designs ask participants to record their moods, stressors, and eating episodes over several days or weeks, making it possible to track whether specific emotional states predict comfort food consumption in real time.

These complementary methods provide a more robust picture than any single design. Surveys reveal broad expectation patterns, experiments test causal effects of emotional or social triggers, and diary studies show how comfort eating unfolds in everyday life. Together, they converge on the idea that comfort food serves multiple psychological functions extending well beyond simple enjoyment.

Expectations vs. actual predictors of comfort eating

Survey findings consistently show that participants rate “pleasurable and rewarding feelings” and “positive emotions” as their strongest expectations from comfort eating. People report believing that comfort foods primarily provide treats, rewards, and boosts in mood, and they often highlight sweet, calorie-dense foods such as chocolate, cakes, or pastries as prototypical examples. However, when researchers statistically examine which expectations actually predict how frequently people eat comfort food, a notable mismatch appears.

In the 2025 expectations study, the beliefs that comfort food would alleviate boredom and enhance cognitive competence were the most consistent predictors of higher comfort eating frequency, with expectations about managing negative affect also showing positive associations. By contrast, expectations about pleasure and reward although rated highest showed weak or even negative relationships with eating frequency, suggesting that “treat” language may be more of a narrative people tell themselves than a true driver of repeated behavior. This disconnect suggests that comfort food is often used not just to feel good but to fill empty time, maintain

concentration, or cope with low-grade negative states that are hard to articulate, such as restlessness or vague unease. Gender, food type, and individual differences

Some studies have examined whether comfort food preferences and frequencies differ by gender or by type of food (sweet vs. savory). Overall, research indicates no significant gender differences in how often men and women report eating comfort food or in the strength of their expectations about emotional outcomes. However, there may be qualitative differences in preferred foods, with women more likely to identify snack-type items (chocolate, chips, desserts) as comfort foods and men somewhat more likely to name meal-like foods (pastas, stews, or meat-based meals), though these patterns are not always statistically large or consistent.

Individual differences in personality, stress reactivity, and baseline mood also shape comfort eating. People with higher levels of negative affectivity or emotional dysregulation may rely more heavily on food as a coping mechanism, especially when other forms of support feel unavailable. Likewise, those who habitually snack when bored may come to associate any unstructured time with eating, reinforcing a cycle in which boredom reliably triggers cravings for comforting, energy-dense foods.



Comfort food as a social surrogate: Attachment and belonging

A particularly influential line of research examines comfort food as a “social surrogate,” meaning a non-human target that symbolically fulfills social or attachment needs. Experimental work shows that comfort foods can evoke relationship-related thoughts and memories, especially among people with secure attachment styles who generally view their close relationships as supportive and reliable. For these individuals, eating a familiar comfort food that is linked to family traditions or shared meals can temporarily reduce feelings of loneliness following a belongingness threat.

For example, one set of studies found that when participants recalled an experience of social exclusion or relational strain, those with secure attachment showed greater preference for comfort foods and reported reduced loneliness after writing about or imagining eating such foods. In contrast, individuals with more insecure attachment did not show the same psychological benefit, suggesting that comfort food's social utility depends on having a reservoir of positive relationship memories for the food to symbolically activate. These findings underscore that comfort food is not only about taste; it is also about the activation of cognitive and emotional representations of significant others. This social-surrogate function helps explain why comfort eating often increases during episodes of isolation or loneliness, such as moving away from home, ending a relationship, or living alone. In such contexts, the warm associations linked to traditional, or childhood foods can provide a sense of continuity and security, even in the absence of physical social contact, which can both support emotional resilience and risk reinforcing overeating.

Chronic stress, boredom, and pain

Beyond acute emotions, chronic states such as ongoing stress, boredom, and long-term physical pain are strongly related to comfort food use. Boredom has emerged as a key predictor of comfort eating frequency, with evidence showing that people who endorse boredom-relief expectations are more likely to eat comfort foods both more frequently and more broadly across different food types. In times of low stimulation, food becomes an easy, accessible activity that offers both sensory input and a small emotional lift, making it an attractive but potentially problematic coping strategy.

Chronic pain research provides another striking example. A 2025 study from Australia found that more than two-thirds of adults with chronic pain reported turning to comfort foods at least once a fortnight to cope with pain flare-ups. Participants commonly cited seeking a pleasant experience, distraction from pain, and relief from negative emotions as reasons for eating, illustrating how comfort food serves both hedonic and coping functions. However, this pattern carries risks: increased intake of high-calorie foods can lead to weight gain, which may, in turn, worsen pain and create a vicious cycle of pain, emotional distress, and comfort eating.

These findings suggest that public health approaches need to recognize comfort food as part of a broader coping repertoire for managing chronic distress. Interventions that offer alternative ways to manage boredom, improve mood, and regulate pain such as engaging activities, social support, or psychological therapies may reduce reliance on food without dismissing the real psychological needs that comfort eating currently addresses.



II. Conclusion:

Comfort food consumption is a multidimensional behavior shaped by expectations, emotional regulation needs, social connection, and chronic states such as stress, boredom, and pain.

Although people consciously emphasize pleasure and reward when explaining why they eat comfort food, the most reliable predictors of frequent comfort eating are expectations related to alleviating boredom, managing negative affect, and, in some contexts, enhancing cognitive performance or restoring threatened belonging. Comfort foods can function as social surrogates for securely attached individuals, activating relationship memories and easing loneliness, but they can also become habitual coping tools for those facing chronic pain or persistent emotional strain.

These insights have practical implications. Interventions that simply advise people to “eat less junk food” are unlikely to succeed if they ignore the emotional, social, and boredom-related

motivessustainingcomforteating. Morepromisingstrategiesmayincludeteachingalternative emotion- regulation skills, expanding access to meaningful activities that reduce boredom, and strengthening socialsupportso thatfood is not theprimary sourceof comfort. Futureresearch could test cognitive- behavioral, mindfulness- based, or attachment- informed interventions that directly target these underlying drivers, thereby reducing unhealthy comfort eating while still acknowledging the legitimate human need for comfort and connection.

Bibliography:

- [1]. <https://www.hunimed.eu/news/why-do-we-crave-comfort-food/>
- [2]. <https://www.news-medical.net/news/20250714/Study-reveals-the-psychological-reasons-for-comfort-eating.aspx>
- [3]. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12297910/> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/food-news/why-we-really-crave-comfort-food-new-study-reveals-the-psychology-behind-emotional-eating/articleshow/122486967.cms>
- [4]. <https://ubwp.buffalo.edu/gabriellab/wp-content/uploads/sites/65/2025/04/> <https://www.uts.edu.au/news/2025/10/two-in-three-people-with-chronic-pain-turn-to-comfort-eating>
- [5]. <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2025-10-14/chronic-pain-patients-use-comfort-eating-to-cope-study-finds>
- [6]. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/40732884/>
- [7]. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/food-news/why-we-really-crave-comfort-food-new-study-reveals-the-psychology-behind-emotional-eating/articleshow/110087608.cms>