


RED BOOK

inside

LAW & ORDER:
SVU's
**Mariska
Hargitay**

WEIGHT LOSS
how to break the food-mood cycle for good

AGE 06




THE YEAR'S BEST BEAUTY
40 products that make our lives easier

AGE 23

SEX & LOVE
6 ways to get closer (and stay that way)

AGE 28



SHOPPING SMARTS
don't get tricked at the checkout + the best ways to pack and ship gifts (p.30)

AGE 74


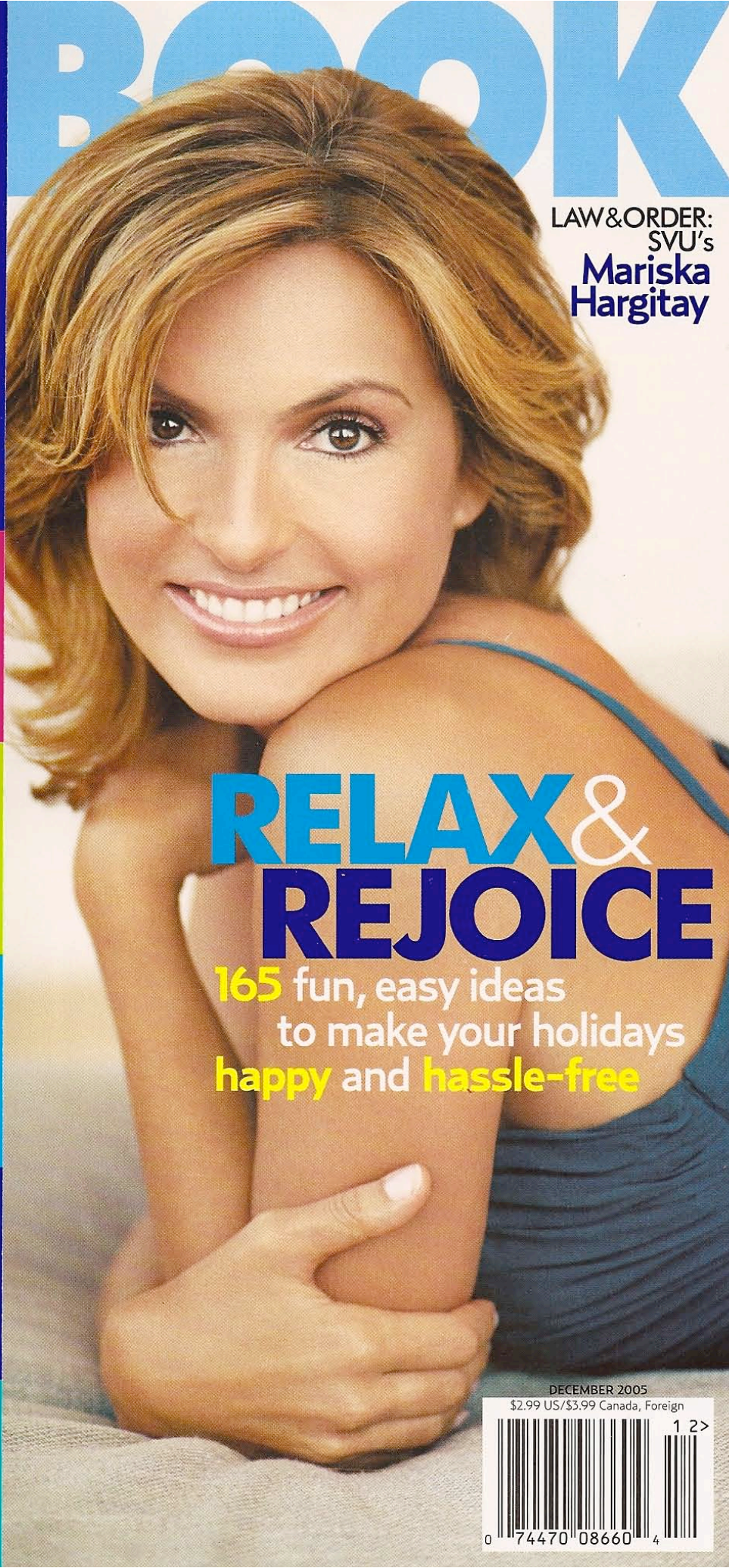
HOLIDAY MEALS
19 simple, delicious dishes to try

AGE 58



LIFE SKILLS
how to fix a broken friendship

AGE 12

RELAX & REJOICE

165 fun, easy ideas to make your holidays happy and hassle-free

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hungry?

or are those your emotions growling again?

If food is your solution for dealing with sadness, stress, anger, or boredom, it's time to put down the Cheetos and start asking yourself some tough questions.

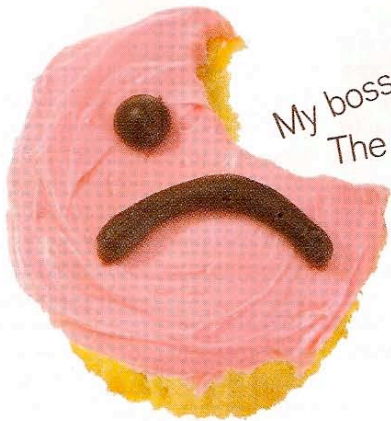
by Dana Hudephol

It wasn't the first time I sat alone in my car in the parking lot of the local Dairy Queen, scraping out the last spoonfuls of my Brownie Earthquake sundae and feeling sorry for myself because my husband had gone away on yet another business trip. But on this particular afternoon, I had an epiphany: I wouldn't dream of bingeing on alcohol or drugs to deal with sadness or anger, so why did I think it was okay to continually comfort myself with food?

Apparently, I'm not alone. "Food is the number one mood-altering substance used in the United States," says Marilyn Migliore, R.D., author of *The Hunger Within*. That's because in the moment, food gives you something pleasurable to focus on instead of the problems in your life. Feeling lonely or bored? Eating gives you something to do. Stressed or angry? Eat and you'll relax. Feeling happy? Celebrate with cupcakes! Hate your body? Might as well eat since you already look bad anyway. But don't blame yourself for finding comfort in food—the fact is, we've all been trained to, literally from birth.

Why food makes us feel better

Our very first lesson about the connection between food and comfort takes place the instant we nurse at our mother's breast, or drink from a bottle, while being held in nurturing arms. From that moment on, the idea that "food is love" gets reinforced over and over: We're offered a lollipop to soothe a scraped knee, we celebrate birthdays with cake, Christmas with cookies, a promotion with a fancy dinner. Food is also a backdrop for so many of our favorite activities, like watching a movie or a baseball game. And we rely on meals for their social aspect—they let us spend everyday time



My boss is driving me crazy!
The kids are wearing me down.

with family and friends. By the time we're adults, we've had decades of practice in using food to soothe. "We learn that food makes us feel better," says Linda Spangle, R.N., a weight-loss coach in Denver, who specializes in emotional eating. "So if we don't like how we feel, we eat."

And although you know that activities like exercise and meditation relieve stress and anxiety as well, eating is far easier and gives more instant satisfaction. Also, unlike drug or alcohol dependence, looking to Cheetos (or ice cream sundaes) to solve your problems won't jeopardize your friendships or your job.

What is emotional eating?

Emotional eating, put simply, is using food to avoid or disconnect from feelings of sadness, stress, anxiety, loneliness, anger, body dissatisfaction, you name it.

When you're eating to feed a mood, you often have a very specific idea of the type of food you're craving, and you tend to eat that food quickly. Emotional eating usually takes place in between meals and involves mindlessness—you're munching on autopilot. And if you ask yourself, Will I feel bad about this later?, the answer almost always will be yes. Another big tip-off: You tend to do most of your emotional eating in secret, and would feel embarrassed if you were spotted, say, in your kitchen eating slice after slice of raw cookie dough.

And, unfortunately, it's not broccoli we crave when we're feeding an emotional need—it's fat. "We're temporarily soothed by ice cream and chips not only for the immediate mouthfeel (creamy smoothness and crunching), but also because the fat and sugar in these foods create an intense sensory experience that activates the feel-good portion of your brain," says Migliore. For as long as that good feeling lasts, you can blot out all the other stuff that's bringing you down.

What's especially tricky is that on some level, emotional eating feels *effective*: It feels like you are taking care of yourself, soothing yourself. For the moment, it might let you tune out your overbearing neighbor or

your whining 3-year-old. But here is the sad truth: Eating does nothing to solve your problems. Furthermore, the real problem usually isn't even your neighbor, your 3-year-old, or your boss—what's driving you to eat is your fear of facing deeper anxieties (I'm the worst mother/employee/neighbor in the world!).

Ultimately, the euphoria or solace you get from diving head-first into a bag of chips or cookies is short-lived. Within minutes of finishing, the cycle of regret and shame usually kicks in full force. You know it well: the sick, bloated feeling in your stomach (or even just in your ordinarily nutritionally minded brain) that signals loud and clear you've overdone it. Next comes a rough session of berating yourself for having no willpower and eating so much junk. And to top it all off, "when you finish off the bowl of ice cream, you're right back where you started—grappling with whatever thoughts or feelings you were dealing with before," says Migliore.

Marci Hansen, 37, a marketing director in Vancouver, WA, says that her emotional-eating episodes are usually work-related. "About once or twice a month, I really overdo it on sweets when I have an especially stressful day at work," she says. Hansen once consumed an entire box of chocolate animal crackers while sitting at her desk, and also an entire bowl of cake batter while working from home.

In its milder forms, emotional eating can keep you from reaching your ideal weight and leave you feeling like a failure. An emotional eater may even turn to destructive means—such as fasting, purging, or excessive exercise—to try to offset the extra calories. At its most extreme, this behavior, known as binge-eating disorder, is a vicious habit that wreaks havoc on your weight and overall health and is often linked to clinical depression and anxiety (though it's not clear whether these conditions are a trigger for emotional eating, or vice versa).

Margaret Jeronimo's emotional-eating habit helped propel her weight to 267 pounds. A 26-year-old legal secretary from Houston, Jeronimo finds herself turning to food daily to help her deal with unpleasant emotions, particularly anger and frustration. She recalls an episode from a few months back when she became angry after being reprimanded by her boss and decided she *had* to have a hot-fudge sundae. "I was so pissed off that I literally told myself, 'I need this,'" says Jeronimo, who went out with friends after work and ordered a three-scoop sundae. "As soon as I had that first bite, it was like, 'Ahh!' I could actually feel myself calming down." ▶

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EMOTIONAL HEALTH

How to break the cycle

It's hard to drop a coping mechanism you've been using your entire life, but you can do it. "Overcoming emotional-eating habits comes down to learning how to spot your triggers, and then adopting nonfood ways of coping with them," says Spangle. It's also about really learning to listen to what the underlying issues are, and trying to address the negative-affirming nature of the habit (what makes you feel better now makes you feel worse later). Breaking the habit means you get to have a healthier relationship with food (which leads to more enjoyment from eating the foods you love). And by doing away with the self-destructive behavior, you'll begin to love and understand yourself a whole lot more (and who wouldn't want that?). First rule? When you give in to an emotional-eating episode, use it as a learning experience. "Instead of condemning the behavior and yourself, read between the lines," says Migliore.

STEP 1 Give your meals some much-needed structure. Start by learning to distinguish when you're eating for hunger and when you're eating based on emotions. You can remove a lot of the guesswork by planning ahead. "Schedule three regular meals a day with a snack in the morning, afternoon, and evening," says Joyce D. Nash, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Menlo Park, CA, and author of *Binge No More*. "Don't eat between those times," says Nash. "That way, if you've planned to eat an apple with peanut butter at 3 p.m., and at 2:30 p.m. you're feeling like you want to check out the vending machine, you can tell yourself it's only a half hour until you have your snack." When you take care of your body by building a structure of nourishing food into your day, "your body is not doing as much screaming, so you're less likely to succumb to an emotional-eating episode," says Spangle.

Other ways to build in more control: Use a small serving bowl for chips instead of eating right from the bag, ban foods you tend to gorge on from your house, and post reminders to keep you from turning to food to feel better. "I teach people to put a sign on their refrigerator or cupboard door that says, IT'S NOT IN HERE," says Spangle.

Finally, be aware of *any* mindless eating, such as eating and doing something else at the same time. You're more prone to work your way through a container of Pringles while you're reading e-mails or watching TV. That's because your brain isn't registering the eating nearly as well as if you were *only* doing that. Make a point also to eat slowly and with awareness.

STEP 2 Notice your triggers, then examine your feelings. If you do get the urge to eat at an unscheduled time, try to determine what's eating you other than hunger. Instead of pushing the emotion away with food, confront it head-on. Ask yourself, What

am I feeling and why? The more you ask the right questions, the better you will get at finding ways to take care of yourself using means other than food. For effective solutions, you need to get to the specific root of your emotion. What you're feeling is usually bigger than the incident that sparked it.

For the long term, keeping a food diary is another way to help you pinpoint triggers and accept more accountability for what you eat. You can note the foods that you turn to, how you're feeling when you eat them, and overall food thoughts.

STEP 3 Take action to address the problem. Once you've pinpointed the cause of your anger or stress, take it a step further and ask, What can I do that will make me feel better right now *and* later? "If you determine that you're snacking because your kids' fighting is driving you crazy, you need to come up with solutions to manage that, such as setting up playdates, to give yourself a break," says Nash.

STEP 4 Adopt nonfood tactics to address your emotions. "I teach people to create an 'instead list' of things they can do instead of eating," says Spangle.

Allison Roybal, 27, a graduate student in Edmond, OK, came up with her own "instead list" after she started attending Weight Watchers meetings. "It used to be that I ate every time I was lonely, depressed, angry, stressed, bored, or happy," she says. "Now when I am lonely, I fill the void by calling a friend. When I'm depressed, I go to Blockbuster and rent a movie. When I'm angry, I confront the person or take a long walk until I feel better."

I'm proud to report that I've taken steps to curb my emotional eating. I've replaced the sugary indulgences that once filled my cupboards with healthier alternatives (like nuts and fruits). I also made a promise to myself that I wouldn't drive anywhere in search of food. I owe it to myself to first ask what nonfood activity could give me solace



instead. And when I'm upset with my husband, I let him know.

Despite these steps, I still sometimes overdo it. But rather than beat myself up afterward, I just resolve to do better the next time I'm faced with the same situation—because now I know how I can do better. The empowerment I feel has been the key to allowing me to regain control over food, instead of letting food control me. And honestly, life never tasted so sweet. 