

Food for Mood: Designs for care-free emotional eating

Design by Leonie Houwen

Text by Pieter Desmet

When I'm feeling down, I always start craving spaghetti with tomato sauce. Just sitting back on the couch with a big bowl in my lap; my perfect comfort food. Perhaps you can relate; trying to feel a little better with a box of chocolates or bury a stressful day with a bag of crisps. Mood and eating behaviour are inextricably linked. We often use food when we want to improve our mood or make a good feeling feel even better. When we do, we generally don't go for the healthiest options on the menu. We pick something that's too high in fat or too sweet. It's therefore no surprise that nutritional scientists have proven that emotional eating has many *negative* effects. These include increased risk of obesity, cardiovascular disease and depressive disorders.

Emotional eating as a disorder

Research into emotional eating has mainly focused on the extremes – the disorders. That's certainly important research, but it's also one-sided. There's no denying that excesses lead to serious consequences, but the disproportionate focus on the negative aspects has given emotional eating a bad rep. Are we perhaps demonising emotional eating? I mainly experience my comfort



spaghetti as healing and soothing. Or as emotion researcher Catharine Evers from Utrecht University put it, 'We all reach for a bag of M&Ms when we're feeling a little down every now and then. Is that a disorder?'¹

The benefits of emotional eating

Designer Leonie Houwen was curious about the *positive* aspects of emotional eating. That's why she designed a series of products to support those positive effects as part of her graduation project. She asked herself two questions. First, what actions are involved with emotional eating? Previous studies focused mainly on the question of *what* and *how much* you eat when you're driven by emotions. Leonie was interested in something else; *how* you eat. Second, what are the differences between moods? Sadness is a different motive than stress or boredom. And how do you eat when you're happy, or care-free? Leonie interviewed twelve people about their emotion-driven eating behaviour. She discovered that there are at least 24 different eating strategies, each with its own interplay of actions. A good example is using food as a way to take a break when experiencing stress. Or as a comforting way to treat yourself, a relaxing ritual, a refuelling boost, and so on. She designed six products for six strategies. Four are described below.

Chocolate Matryoshka

You're sad and craving something delicious to make yourself feel better. Why shouldn't you spoil yourself with a little treat? The chocolate Matryoshka lets you savour every bite of chocolate: It's a chocolate bar that you keep unwrapping. Each piece is a new bar! This means that one bar contains seven little presents. You deserve it. Now you can get at it again.

What-to-eat self-help book

You're tired and really don't feel like thinking about what to have for dinner. You feel empty and lack inspiration. The what-to-eat self-help book gives you the answer. The book offers 100 ready-to-go and very easy solutions. It chooses for you to make life a little easier. Open the book to any page, and you'll know what to do.

Modular smoothie boost

You're feeling a little stressed and have busy day ahead of you. You can use a little confidence booster. The modular smoothie recharges you both mentally and physically. Each capsule is filled with specific ingredients. Go for quick results or combine capsules to get the exact nutritional combo you need. Select the capsules you need, click them together, shake, drink, and you're ready to go.



The 24 forms of emotional eating



Seven presents in one chocolate bar



The self-help book makes it easy to choose



A modular smoothie for a quick pick-me-up



The bite-sized meal is easy to chew on

Bite-sized meal

A deadline is stressing you out. You really don't have time for an elaborate meal. Don't worry; the bite-sized meal ensures you won't lose any time. This bite-sized meal is easy to consume. It allows you to keep working while you eat. It consists of bite-sized pieces, each with its own no-spill fork, neatly in a row. Just put them in your mouth.

Food for thought

Ten people reviewed the design prototypes. Initial reactions were mostly sniggering. People recognised

the phenomenon of emotional eating and found it funny to see as something you could make designs for. After that, they started to take it seriously. They spoke about their own eating behaviours driven by emotions; when and which actions are involved. It showed that the products encouraged people to talk about emotional eating and made it tangible. They give food for thought.

Light fare

The power of the designs is that they don't take themselves too seriously. These products aren't

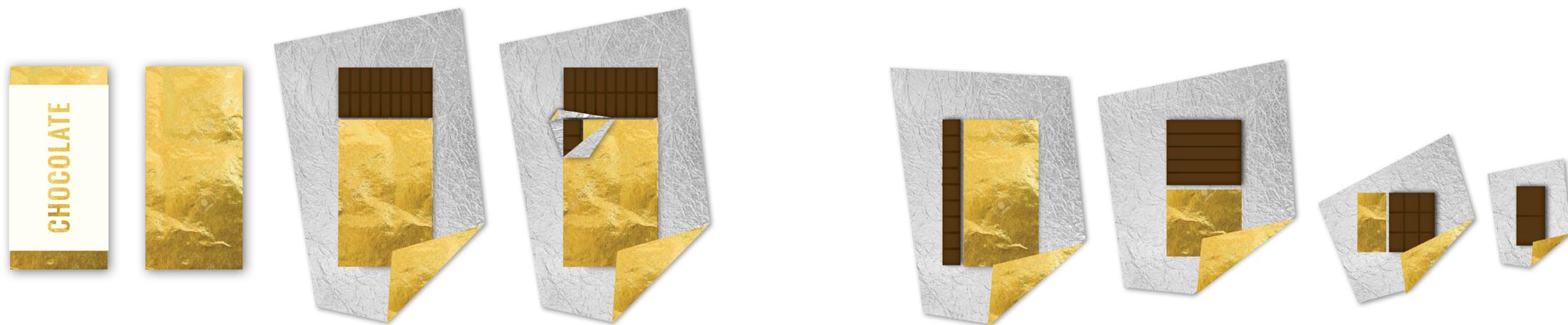
meant for people with a genuine disorder. They make us smile about our own emotional eating. They put things in perspective. Emptying a bag of M&Ms in one go isn't the end of the world; there are worse things in life. During this project, I saw how refreshing it can be to just celebrate our weaknesses. It makes it easier to speak about them without judgement. It goes without saying that eating disorders need to be taken seriously, but black-and-white thinking about any moment of weakness can be how they start. If we're ashamed about that

chocolate bar that was meant to make us feel better, that doesn't help us. Before I started this project, I wasn't aware of my own comfort spaghetti. Now I recognize my pattern, and that allows me to enjoy it even more; lying back on the couch with the big bowl Leonie gave me after her project – a cure for the blues.



Leonie Houwen developed the emotional eating product range in 2017 as part of her graduation project for the Master's programme Design for Interaction. The project was her own idea and part of a broader study into mood and food. Her supervisors were Pieter Desmet and Rick Schifferstein (TU Delft). Leonie works as a researcher and designer at Emotion Studio (Rotterdam). www.emotion.studio

¹This quote (translated from Dutch) comes from the article 'The 'emotional eater', who prefers comfort food when feeling down, is mostly fiction' by Maarten Keulemans (Volkskrant, 29 January 2017).



Every piece is a new little gift

Colophon

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Reference

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