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Leslie Fuller tried to stick to her shopping list on a recent grocery run. Instead, she found herself venturing down the candy aisle, throwing bags of Hershey's Miniatures and M&M's into her cart.

"I should just put them down on the seat and sit on them," said Fuller, a paralegal in Las Vegas. "That's where they're going to go — on my behind. I eat them because it makes me feel better."

Tough times means tighter belts, and for many people tighter pants as they turn to fatty, sugary comfort food to deal with recession-related stress.

Fuller, 51, recently lost her house to foreclosure through no fault of her own. She lost some of her husband's income because of a pay cut. She lost her savings, which the couple used for moving expenses. And she recently put one of her dogs to sleep and is having foot surgery next month.

"To say that my life is stressful is an understatement," said Fuller, who wants to lose 30 pounds. "I see a light at the end of the tunnel. I just don't know how far it is."

Denise Lamothe, an emotional eating expert and clinical psychologist in Exeter, N.H., said research indicates that more than half the population eats more when feeling stressed. She's seeing patients who were losing weight before financial trouble hit but are now eating more.

"As the economy has faltered, people have become more and more anxious, more and more fearful," said Lamothe, author of "The Taming of the Chew." "The more intense feelings become, the more people will turn to sugar, fat and salt, because that's where they can get some relief."

Such food is also cheaper per calorie than fruits and vegetables, said Linda Hlivka, co-author of "Stress Eater Diet." McDonald's, with its value menu, has benefited from the economic slump while sit-down competitors report steep declines.

With so many people out of work, it becomes easy to snack all day to fill the time, said Leslie Seppinni, a psychotherapist in Beverly Hills, Calif, adding that women are more likely than men to binge due to stress.

Suzanne Brumfield, 38, of Groton, Conn., found that out when she was unemployed for about six months last year. She reached for Little Debbie Oatmeal Creme Pies and Drake's Funny Bones cakes because of boredom and mounting frustration from applying for countless jobs. She gained 30 pounds and ended up 100 pounds overweight.

Brumfield, who is married and has three stepchildren, has since found a job as an office manager, but she's making less.

"I never really got anything positive out of it," said Brumfield, who is now on Nutrisystem and has lost 30 pounds. "I never got the, 'That satisfied a craving. I'm good now.' It was, 'I cannot believe I ate another one of those.'"

Stress eating generally follows a lifelong pattern, and most people will stress eat from time to time, depending on how bad the stress is and how long it lasts.

While there are lots of stressors that people will face throughout their lives, whether it's the death of a loved one or divorce, financial worries are a huge trigger for overeating, said Hlivka. Not being able to pay bills, find work or support a family, watching retirement savings shrink. All hit home on a daily basis, she said.

"It doesn't seem to go away, and for those people that are looking for jobs and can't find jobs, their survival is at risk," Hlivka said.

Jan Anderegg, 48, a mom of five in Guttenberg, Iowa, said at one time she was eating five or six boxes of candy a day to cope with money worries. She and her husband's farm suffered a hit last year because of the rising costs of corn and hay, and they continue to field calls from bill collectors.

But Anderegg has lost 60 pounds since December. Instead of eating, she now writes short stories and logs on to the free health and weight loss Web site SparkPeople.com for support.

She keeps one box of candy in the house so she doesn't go overboard. And she also eats more fruits and vegetables, drinks more water and watches portions.

"I wish I could say I felt it was under control," Anderegg said about her stress eating. "I think it's going to be an ongoing struggle for the rest of my life."

Experts recommend stress eaters acknowledge the stress, and substitute eating from boredom, depression or anxiety with exercise or a hobby. But it's important to get a handle on it. For most people, the extra calories will add up to extra pounds.

"It's a mindless satisfaction that seems harmless in the moment," said Seppinni. "But obviously has larger repercussions later, no pun intended."