

Want to stop craving chocolate? Here are two options.



by Galadriel Watson June 26

Chocolate: creamy, rich, aromatic, smooth on your tongue. Dark and bitter, or milky and sweet. Chocolate chips, chocolate ice cream, chocolate cookies. Are you salivating yet? You aren't alone. Chocolate is widely regarded as the most commonly craved food in Western society.

Those who have weight or health concerns might want to curb their hankering for chocolate or other alluring foods. But how do you banish a persistent, powerful craving? Two recent studies have tackled this question and highlighted promising, but different, strategies.

To start, it's important to understand the development of a craving. As Julia Hormes, an assistant professor of psychology at the University at Albany, part of the State University of New York, explains, cravings start with a trigger. This could be external, such as the scent of chocolate chip cookies wafting from a nearby bakery. Or it could be internal, such as being angry or bored. Second, you elaborate on these thoughts by using mental imagery, and this is what turns it into a full-fledged craving.

Hormes says, “Instead of just having the cookie, we start thinking about it: When did I last have it, could I go back to the bakery and buy it, what did it taste like, what did it look like, what did it smell like? In other words, we start obsessing over it.” To banish the craving, you need to interrupt this process. One approach is to take a page from the practice of mindfulness and accept the thoughts and move on. Another approach is to try to suppress the thoughts altogether by distracting yourself.

The mindfulness approach helps people in the throes of cravings realize that “thoughts are just that: They’re thoughts,” Hormes says. To envision this, imagine placing your thoughts on a leaf and watching them float downstream. “Thoughts come and go,” Hormes says. “You don’t have to linger on them. You certainly don’t have to act on them.” Hormes recently co-authored [a study of this approach](#) in undergraduate students. Those who reported greater acceptance of their craving-related thoughts also reported lower levels of food cravings and were less likely to eat because of internal or external triggers.

While the second approach — trying to suppress cravings — might seem less effective, studies have shown it can work as well. [Researchers at the University of Salzburg in Austria](#) exposed two groups of participants — those who experienced frequent and intense chocolate cravings in everyday life, and those who didn’t — to images of chocolate. Each group was alternately told to either think freely about anything, or think about anything *but* chocolate.

“We did indeed expect that suppressing chocolate thoughts would increase chocolate thoughts,” says co-author Adrian Meule, a researcher in the psychology department at the University of Salzburg. It’s like being told not to think of an elephant; usually, an elephant automatically comes to mind. In this case, however, the chocolate-loving participants were able to stop thinking about chocolate by focusing on future events, other people or even traffic lights. (Non-chocolate lovers didn’t show such an effect, probably because they weren’t particularly craving chocolate in the first place.)

Another [earlier study](#) found that both acceptance and suppression/distraction worked. Participants were either sidetracked from their chocolate-related thoughts thanks to guided imagery (“Imagine you’re walking through a forest”) or were told to accept those thoughts.

It’s not clear, however, that acceptance or distraction actually change behavior beyond a study period. For the imagery vs. acceptance study, for example, participants were offered chocolate at the end of the study. While they may have been able to reduce the intensity of their cravings, they didn’t reduce how much they ate when chocolate was put in front of them. In fact, all groups ate the same amount: the acceptance group, the suppression group and the control group that didn’t try to regulate their chocolate-related thoughts at all.

As for simply reducing the sometimes-uncomfortable pull of cravings, both Meule and Hormes acknowledge that thought suppression might only work temporarily. “It’s not inconsistent with the literature that thought suppression can be a good short-term strategy,” Hormes says, “but I doubt it’s something that would work on an everyday basis to manage cravings long-term.”

Acceptance-based techniques may be more sustainable, even when the temptation is right there. Hormes points to a study that required participants to carry around boxes of sweets for 72 hours — but not eat them. Acceptance-based coping strategies helped participants manage their cravings over the three days.

But the bottom line is it doesn't hurt to try any of these methods to prevent a whiff from a bakery from triggering an intense desire. "Anything that interferes with these processes can stop the craving from developing," Meule says. "This is why so many strategies work, particularly those that involve mental imagery. Cravings are transient — think about a wave that rises up and levels off after some time — which is why different strategies work to 'ride the wave' until it's gone."

Or, give in — just a little bit. Hormes says, "The more you make something forbidden, the more likely you are to obsess over it." If you're lusting for chocolate, her advice is to "have one piece of really good, high-quality chocolate, savor it and basically move on."