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# **BODY POSITIVITY AND EATING DISORDERS**

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# BODY POSITIVITY AND EATING DISORDERS

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## BODY POSITIVITY

Or, the Art of Being Comfortable in Your Own Skin

## THE DANGERS OF THE DIET

It's everywhere – billboards, magazines, poolside conversations, and biology textbooks. It shows up in advertisements and in grocery stores and gyms. Still baffled? This ubiquitous and influential force is called diet culture, which [verywellfit.com](http://verywellfit.com) aptly describes as the “pervasive belief that appearance and body shape are more important than physical, psychological, and general wellbeing.”

The truth is, while one diet may seem innocent, one singular diet increases your risk of developing an eating disorder by 20-25%, and 95% of diets fail. Intuitive eating is the logical, scientific, and statistically-proven approach to eating.

## WHAT EXACTLY IS INTUITIVE EATING?

Intuitive eating, pioneered by anti-diet dietitians Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch, is a revolutionary eating approach that has been shown to reduce food preoccupation, emotional and disordered eating, stress and anxiety and improve body image, cholesterol levels, metabolism, and self-esteem. So what is it?

## **1. Reject the diet mentality.**

Throw out all those books with shiny covers of taut, bronze abdomens and tantalizing covers. Hold a mental funeral for all the diets you started so hopefully but ended so dejectedly.

The pursuit of thinness is exciting and glamorous because of its premium in Western society, thanks to the 71 billion-dollar diet industry. Consider two simultaneous truths: dieting starts off super fun and can result in weight gain, eating disorders, and low self-esteem.

I remember thinking: I will never diet again. Say it with conviction, even if you're not so sure. (It's okay if you need to do step one a few times or even every day—it's a process).

## **2. Honor your hunger.**

Just like you would take a sip of water if you woke up parched at 2am, eat when you're hungry. Just ate lunch an hour ago but starting to feel pangs? Eat. Then, stop when you're full and satisfied. You do not need to finish your plate or feel absolutely stuffed. In the inverse, you do not need to stop when everyone else has. Your hunger is unique to you and informs you exactly what your body needs.

Hunger is not an enemy to defeat with a diet. Honor it.

If this is hard, think about how you would feel about a friend. Would you tell a friend to stop eating because you've decided they've had enough food? What about the opposite— would you force a friend to keep eating to clean off their plate? If you wouldn't do that to a friend, don't do it to yourself. To really remedy this, think of your hunger itself as a friend. Honor your own hunger just as you would honor a friend's.

### **3. Make peace with food (and stop binging).**

Abolish the food police, as Tribole would say. No food is inherently good or bad – there is nutrient-dense, and less nutrient dense. Practice calling foods “fun or nutritious” instead of using diction that implies a moral element of food choice (unless you stole it).

Remember the last time you told yourself you wouldn't have pizza at your nephew's birthday party, only to find yourself eating slice after slice after everyone left? Temporary deprivation only leads to long-term binging. There is no prize for restriction—but there is a consequence. Fully allow yourself to eat, enjoy, and be present. Trust yourself to monitor internal satisfaction and fullness signals enough to enjoy with everyone else.

*It is physiologically impossible to avoid the binge after restricting yourself. Your body is evolved to demand energy during starvation mode –Bella\**

#### **4. Challenge the food police.**

A lot of times before people eat something less nutrient-dense, they say, “OMG, I am so naughty.” If you’re going to eat it anyways, just enjoy it. Similarly, eat what your body is craving when it is craving it. If you have a hankering for a strange food combination, just eat it. It could be your body’s signal that you need a specific nutrient from the nutrition profile of your craving.

Take, for example, when the body is low on iron. I’ve seen that with a friend of mine—when their iron levels are really low, they want to eat ice chips and drink soda from a can. Your body is giving you a signal that it needs something. So go ahead –drink the soda.

*I remember the first time I realized I could eat whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. It was so freeing—but at the same time, I mourned how much energy I’d been wasting on food. Decision fatigue is real, and it took away my energy to exert free will in other areas of my life. –Emunah*

## **5. Discover the satisfaction factor.**

Food is fuel, but not just fuel. Watch your life become enriched by religious, cultural, familial, and national celebrations whose delicious foods offer opportunities for joy, connection, and nourishment. Consciously relish what you are eating and exercise gratitude for the food in front of you.

Enjoy what you're eating, and don't treat certain foods like they're a treat to only have on special occasions. When you honor your enjoyment of a meal, and enjoy it without punishing yourself, you're less likely to then binge eat that same meal. Take joy in food, just as you take joy in engaging with anything else that you enjoy.

## **6. Feel your fullness-**

And try to respect it. If you can't, no one's perfect. Part of Intuitive Eating is actually realizing that stringency in fullness and hungry cues can be a sneaky ploy of diet culture. Most of the time, aim to stop when you're full. But if you don't occasionally, accept it with grace and self-compassion.

## **7. Cope with your emotions and kindness.**

“Emotional eating” is not always a bad thing. From a young age, our families used food to soothe and comfort us. When we're homesick or miss someone, we often crave a specific dish.



But if you're bothered by how out-of-control your eating gets when you're upset,

learn to cope in ways that are not food-like calling a friend, taking a bath, or meeting with a therapist. With that said, a sprinkle cookie is a perfectly respectable way to end a horrific day. Food can be a coping mechanism, but it should be just another tool in your belt. Overreliance on any one coping mechanism is not healthy.

## **8. Respect your body.**

Not everyone is meant to be a size zero. Acquiesce to your natural set-point, a range in which you are most likely to fall if you eat in alignment with your hunger cues. Dieting to fit into a size zero can and will be dangerous if that's not the size that your healthy body is supposed to be. If you starve your body, not only do you increase your risks of eating disorders, but you also diminish your physical health. Muscle cells atrophy because your body needs energy. Energy stores within the body diminish. The body attacks itself when it is not being nourished. It is not worth it to destroy your body to fit into the smallest size available.

*You don't need to strut around thinking, "I'm so gorgeous," to have a positive self-image. Start with simply respecting your body as the vessel that carries you through life. This is called body tolerance. –Emunah*

Even if you do not feel you are in your set-point range, wait patiently and try to practice body tolerance. Through IE, you will most likely get there.

## 9. Movement

Exercise is often used as self-punishment or as a weight loss method—but don't let diet culture steal joyful movement from your life. Pick up a new activity—like walking alongside the beach, sunrise yoga, or biking with a loved one—that makes you feel proud of how capable your body is. (If you are disabled or struggling with an active eating disorder, follow the recommendations of your healthcare provider).

Walking is a great way to get some exercise, especially if you're busy. It's an enjoyable way to get out and include some joyful movement in your life.



## 10. Gentle Nutrition

If you have allergies or a health condition that requires that you eat a certain way, honor that. If your allergies or condition are severe, speak with an intuitive eating dietitian to make a plan that works for you. Focus on adding nutrition instead of subtracting calories. Eating chips? How about some avocados with them to balance the glucose spike associated with carbs?

## WHAT IF I NEED TO LOSE WEIGHT?

According to your BMI, doctors, parents, or “friends,” you may need to lose weight. The first thing to consider with this is “why.” Ask yourself: what is compelling me to lose weight?

Is it because of how other people perceive you? Think: how else can you determine your worth? Your body is the least interesting thing about you. Additionally, a study cited by the Business Insider suggests that people who lost 5% of their body weight were more likely to feel depressed four years later.

95% of diets fail, so you’re very unlikely to maintain fat loss for more than a few months. In fact, you’re more likely to gain weight or develop an eating disorder than if you hadn’t dieted at all.

BMI was developed by a mathematician (Jacques Quetelet) for use as a measurement of weight by the population to help the government calculate resource allocation, not for individuals. It does not take into account muscle mass, height, build, or lifestyle.

Even if a doctor tells you that you need to lose weight for “health-related concerns,” you reserve the right to be skeptical. Sudden loss of weight can aggravate certain medical conditions. Even if your doctor insists that your health will improve automatically if you lose weight, get curious about causation vs. correlation. Can you implement new, healthy habits such as drinking more water or blending baby spinach into strawberry smoothies without aiming to shrink yourself? An article by the NPR suggests that healthy habits have a greater bearing on overall health and longevity than weight on its own, except for at the extreme ends of the spectrum.

Read more: <https://asdah.org/health-at-every-size-haes-approach/>

<https://www.npr.org/2019/04/25/717059239/a-saner-mindset-for-weight-loss>

## THE MODELING INDUSTRY: A PICTURE ISN'T WORTH GIVING UP 1000 CALORIES



The modeling industry is to diet culture as peanut butter is to jelly: “the worst-kept secret about the industry is its reliance on harmful and toxic diet culture,” says Hailey, who has experience in the industry. About forty percent of models have reported having eating disorders, and that number is most likely higher due to underreporting. “Models aren’t necessarily aware of having an eating disorder; the industry is centered around people being perceived as beautiful due to their thinness,” adds Hailey.

“Many models are threatened to get dropped if they don’t lose weight. Many are encouraged to stay skinny, exercise even more, and skip meals.”

Hailey implores, “Are you hungry after a long shoot? Eat something. Did you just come out of rehearsal or a costume fitting or an audition, and you feel like you haven’t eaten all day? Eat. You need it. Your body needs fuel. To be able to perform, or model, or film anything, you need to have energy to do so.”

Ultimately, it isn’t worth it to restrict yourself. You’re worthy at every size. There is now space in modeling for people of all sizes, shapes, and colors. Your success as a model cannot come at the cost of your mental and physical health.

## THE PLANT-BASED DIET AND INTUITIVE EATING

I'm a vegetarian for reasons that range from my moral discomfort with the meat industry to the simple ick factor I get when I see a pound of slimy ground beef. However, it is common for people to take on dietary restrictions in order to more easily eat in a disordered way.

*I remember lying that I thought I had a gluten intolerance just so I wouldn't be pressured to indulge in all the delights available to me in a new city. I was twelve and on vacation. I do not remember the trip: all I can recall is struggling to convert kilojoules to calories. –Abby\**

Deconstruct your dietary restrictions:

- Are you vegetarian for cultural, moral, or religious purposes,
- or for aesthetic or emotional reasons?
- If you had to eat a piece of meat or dairy, what would be your biggest concern? Ethics—or saturated fat?

*I had to take a break from veganism because I lost my period and had a low mood constantly. It's okay to put yourself above all.*

*–Brianna\**

## CALORIE COUNTING: NOT JUST ARITHMETIC PRACTICE

I know I'm not alone when I say that calorie counting takes the focus completely off health and completely onto numbers—and not in the same way that grades take the focus off learning, either. Striving for good grades at least results in learning as a byproduct—but with calorie-counting, countless healthy foods are cast away merely because of the potential energy they supply.

For example, an avocado is around 200 calories (234, if you really must know), but a bag of Little Bites is 190. And for someone who's trying to keep her calories as low as possible, you might guess what she's going to eat. However, what people discount when they pick the bag of mini muffins is that the avocado is going to keep you full for longer, and that if you listen to your internal hunger cues, you'll actually eat exactly what and how much your body and mind need. It took me years to discover this: that I didn't need to eat celery sticks for lunch and three ice cream bars at night in the dark of my kitchen, illuminated only by my deep shame and the pool of the freezer light beside me. Instead, I could eat the ice cream bar when and if I craved it to avoid a later binge.

Like we mentioned earlier, one thing that can be very helpful is “and” statements – inclusive sentences that express simultaneous truths. (“I’m going to eat pizza and pasta” – just kidding). In all seriousness: “It feels really exciting to start a diet,” you might say, “and I’m not going to do it because I know that diets aren’t a scientifically proven way to lose weight.” (95% of diets fail).

What completely pulled me out of diet culture and into a healthy self-image and relationship with food was Intuitive Eating. With a slight leap and a little bit of hope, you can too.

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**\*\*All names have been changed to protect the contributors’ privacy.**



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### *Learn more*

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