

Intuitive Eating: Not Another Diet - What is Learning to Eat Intuitively

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Not Another Diet – What is Learning to Eat Intuitively?

It is often difficult to turn on the television without seeing an advertisement for weight loss programs and gimmicks. It seems there is always a new recommendation for losing weight. People are told in turn to reduce fat intake, don't eat carbs, and told to eat foods that work with your blood type.

Despite the hyperbole of the fad diet of the month, everyone really knows that diets don't work. Individuals may lose weight initially, but weight loss from dieting is almost always followed by weight gain, and often more weight is gained than what was lost.

The fluctuating weight of crash diets followed by failures can increase the risk of heart disease and premature death. It can also have emotional consequences that include feelings of failure, lowered self-esteem, less self-trust and self-confidence. These feelings often fuel unhealthy emotional eating styles creating an even more vicious cycle of weight gain and dieting. Furthermore, “emotional eating” and chronic dieting are both risk factors that can precipitate the development of an eating disorder or depression. Research has linked healthy styles of eating to higher self-esteem, life satisfaction, positive coping skills, and an increased sense of optimism, guarding against eating disordered beliefs and behaviors.

Nutritionists Evelyn Tribole, M.S., R.D. and Elyse Resch, M.S., R.D., F.A.D.A. wrote a book introducing a healthy style of eating they have called *Intuitive Eating*. Tribole & Resch (2003), describe intuitive eating as a way of paying attention to and honoring your body's cues about what it needs. This means trusting your body to know what and how much it needs.

Genetic factors, medical obesity, metabolic disorders, neurological disease, medication side effects, other medical factors and certain lifestyles require informed consultation from a physician and a registered dietician. However, advocates of intuitive eating note that most healthy bodies tend to maintain an even healthy weight. Advocates of intuitive eating believe if most people would listen to what their bodies tell us, they would eventually be right where they should be, allowing the body to maintain its natural healthy weight.

Intuitive eating is NOT a diet; rather it is an approach to eating that hopes to achieve more sensible weight moderation through raising awareness about individual's psychological relationships with food.

In normal healthy individuals, hunger is a cue that food is needed. When individuals deny hunger they are fighting a very sophisticated set of biological processes that are in place for the purpose of survival. Restricting eating may trigger cues to fight for survival, and this may intensify cravings. Over time, individuals may adapt to a lower food intake or individual may learn to ignore hunger cues, until the point one becomes ravenously hungry. This triggers the common diet phenomenon of then eating more than our bodies actually need. This may lead people to learn or believe they cannot be trusted with food and the psychological relationship with food then becomes even more complicated. While in most healthy individuals food regulation may be an inherently well-built system, through repeated misdirected diet attempts, individuals begin to substitute external rules and maladaptive habits. Advocates of intuitive eating believe in doing so people lose touch with internal hunger and satiety cues.

Advocates of intuitive eating suggest first rejecting everything people have ever learned about dieting. This means a rather radical approach of forgetting all the rules about what to eat, when to eat, counting calories, carbs, or fat grams. Advocates of intuitive eating believe getting rid of these external rules will help most healthy individuals get back in touch with internal cues about what and how much to eat.

It is likely human nature to sometimes eat when not hungry. This may okay. In many cultures, food plays a part in celebratory events and individuals may find themselves presented with food they are not necessarily hungry for. The key is to be aware that in these circumstances eating is a way to bond, celebrate, or simply an opportunity to eat food that tastes good to us. Advocates of intuitive eating believe that awareness and permitting oneself to eat at these times guards against overindulging, and helps prevent later guilty feelings which can undermine self-esteem and the intuitive eating process.

People also will eat certain food and at certain times for practical reasons. For example, fitting meals into a busy schedule may mean that a meal may be eaten earlier than normal. Eating before one is hungry would obviously be more sensible than waiting until food is unavailable, or when one becomes ravenously hungry.

It is very important to note the people often eat for emotional reasons. This is often a powerful cue for many people. It is customary to celebrate successes by going out to eat and people often grow up associating food with comfort. Movies and television programs reinforce this by showing people who are sad soothing themselves with ice cream or other food treats.

People may also eat out of boredom or as a way to procrastinate. How often has your child asked for a snack or drink as a way to postpone going to bed at night? Adults do this too. It is less difficult to get people to recognize they may eat or overeat when they are stressed, sad, or angry.

Intuitive eating advocates feel the disconnection from hunger cues is furthered by these learned connections between food and emotions. They feel the key is to become aware of when individuals are eating for reasons other than hunger. They suggest looking for ways to meet emotional or other needs without food. For example, getting rest, self-nurturance, expressing and dealing with feelings, and looking for ways to receive comfort from another source are suggested.

For individuals who recognize they are eating to meet emotional

or other needs, there is no benefit from feeling guilty. Instead, the recommendation is to explore what need is being met and work to meet it in other ways. For some individuals, this may require the help of a psychologist.

Our brains and bodies respond to not only hunger cues, but also satiety cues. Satiety cues are those cues that trigger messages that we have had enough food. As with hunger cues, people can become disconnected from satiety cues.

Disconnection from satiety cues may also be learned. As children many of us were taught to finish everything on our plates. This becomes a habit and instead of stopping when full, people continue to eat until all the food on the plate is gone.

Disconnection from satiety cues can also occur when people wait too long to eat and are so hungry that they quickly finish food without time for cues about satiety to reach awareness. This can also occur when not enough time is allowed to eat due to busy schedules.

Perhaps an unrecognized reason for overeating is because individuals come to believe a certain food they are eating is “bad.” Some people unwittingly get into the habit of subconsciously making a pact with themselves that after this piece of chocolate cake they will never eat chocolate cake again, excusing immediate overconsumption. Advocates of intuitive eating believe that giving oneself permission to eat chocolate cake whenever wanted, will actually result in eating less of it, and will result in less desire for it.

While probably not appropriate for everyone, intuitive eating comes down to this: Eat when you are hungry and stop when you are full. This sounds simple enough, but in truth learning to eat intuitively is probably much more complex and takes a lot of practice, patience, and self-understanding.

It is important to note that while the principles of intuitive eating are gaining the attention of researchers there is much to learn about how this style of eating relates to and fits with the larger body of knowledge on body image, chronic dieting, obesity, eating disorders, and other health issues. Thus far, the findings suggest that those who score higher on a measure of intuitive eating score

lower on measures of disordered eating, report less body dissatisfaction, greater interoceptive awareness (awareness of internal bodily states), less pressure for thinness, and are less likely to internalize society's thin ideal body type.

There has also been some support for a link between intuitive eating and greater self-esteem, satisfaction with life, optimism, and proactive coping.

As noted throughout this article, like most things in life, there are caveats. While the principles seem straightforward, eating, diet, and individual's relationship with food is often quite complicated. Even the advocates and the authors of the above book caution readers who have struggled with an eating disorder, or those who are concerned about their relationship with food, to seek the help of a qualified professional before attempting to implement the principles of intuitive eating. They warn the principles can easily backfire and serve to maintain already entrenched patterns of unhealthy or disordered eating.

For more information on eating disorders visit <http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/>.

Marcie Wiseman, Ph.D. has research interests in topics of body image and eating problems within a sociocultural emphasis. She has clinical training in women's issues with a focus on the treatment of eating disorders.

If you are concerned that you may have a problem with food or body image and would like to seek the assistance of a psychotherapist, please call *Clinical Psychology Associates of North Central Florida* at (352)336-2888 to make an appointment.

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