

Why and How to Give Yourself Permission to Eat Anything

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If you look at just the health merits of any food or meal, it is a one-sided view that does not take into consideration the importance of fostering a healthy relationship with food. Paradoxically, it's only when you truly know that you can eat any food, whenever you want, that the food becomes less compelling.

Once you have unconditional permission to eat (regardless of the food's perceived health value), you can honestly ask yourself:

1. Do I really want to eat this?
2. Will I enjoy it now or later?
3. Will I really taste the food now?

And if it turns out that yes, you really want whatever you're craving, then allow yourself to eat with no strings attached. This will allow the food to be savored and nonthreatening (as opposed to that worry of "I'd better eat this now before I come to my senses," or "Tomorrow I'll go on a diet, or start clean").

Tips for Fostering a Healthy Relationship with Food

It may sound like a no-brainer to stop eating when you are full, but when you have a history of chronic dieting and/or eating disorders this can be quite difficult. A number of things need to be in place, some of which may seem counter-intuitive and include the ability to:

1. Honor your biological hunger

If this is difficult, you probably lack trust in your body's own cues or you are unaware of the cues altogether: "How can I be hungry? I just ate." If you are unable to honor your hunger, and instead delay eating, you may wind up too hungry and eat with an intensity that scares you—or you may overeat. To be mindful of different ranges of hunger, rate your hunger on a scale of one to ten. If you choose to eat chocolate when you're really hungry for a meal, you will likely need and eat a dinner's worth of chocolate. These situations create and send the wrong message, and may falsely vali-

date a belief that you cannot trust yourself with food or are out of control.

2. Distinguish biological hunger from emotional hunger.

How can you tell the difference? In general, intense feelings tend to be readily identified (anger, stress, sadness). It gets tricky when the intensity is subtle and/or you have not identified the feeling. A situation such as the "nothingness void," is commonly an unidentified feeling of boredom and tends to occur when there's a break from a hectic schedule. Or, for some it's an inability to tolerate doing nothing. Other clues: the food doesn't taste good and you eat it anyway; you are full and you eat anyway.

3. Remove all judgment about your eating choices.

You are not good or bad based on what you eat. Your values and personhood don't take a dive just because you ate onion rings.

4. Question your assumptions about eating a particular food.

For example, if you have a thought such as, "I don't need that donut," consider the possibility that by eating the doughnut, you will be satisfied and finished with eating and not haunted by a craving. If instead you eat the perceived "right food" or "sensible choice," you will not be satisfied and will probably still eat the doughnut.

5. Put eating fears and thoughts into context.

"If I start eating chocolate I won't be able to stop." That's a common fear with someone who has a history of chronic dieting and/or food deprivation. Dieters or people with strict eating rules typically have not experienced food habituation. Food habituation research shows that the more a person is exposed and allowed to eat a food, the less desirable it

becomes over time. Since chronic dieters have not experienced food habituation for themselves, they worry that they will never stop eating a particular food once they start. Food habituation has been demonstrated in many species (including humans) and with many foods, including: pizza, chocolate and potato chips.

6. Identify your vulnerability factors

If you are feeling too tired, too hungry, or too stressed out (or any intense feeling for that matter), this is a risky time to try any new eating experiences. Respect that in vulnerable times it takes more energy to tryout new things, especially if they are scary.

7. Learn from your experiences.

If you have a negative experience with eating, like arriving home from work and unintentionally devouring leftover pizza, can you explore what factors led up to this? Did you go too long without eating? Did you have realistic expectations? Were you emotionally vulnerable? By framing an event in the context of learning, you will gain some insight and value from the experience (not that you'll necessary like it). The ability to explore and grow also helps you to let go of the event.

No one knows how you feel both physically and emotionally. Nobody can be the expert of your body, except you. One way to reclaim your ability to eat intuitively is to start by taking small eating risks when you are ready and not vulnerable. This will help develop positive food outcomes and help to rebuild your trust in feeding yourself.

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