

What is Intuitive Eating?

Here is a brief overview of Intuitive Eating, the science behind it and the ten principles of Intuitive Eating.

Overview

We are all born intuitive eaters. Babies know when they are hungry and communicate this by crying, fussing, sucking etc. They also know when they are satisfied and show this by unlatching, turning their head, stopping to suck etc. In fact, until about the age of four, kids eat according to their body's natural hunger and fullness cues. Some days they may eat a lot of food, and other days they may eat barely anything. But they (or rather their bodies) know exactly how to balance out their food intake from day to day. As we grow older, our ability to eat intuitively is overridden by rules and restrictions set around food. We learn to finish everything on our plate (rather than learning to stop when our body tells us we have eaten enough). We learn that dessert is a reward and can be used as punishment if we misbehave. We are told that certain foods are good for us and others are bad – so we feel good about ourselves when we eat certain foods and guilty when we eat others. Learning to become an intuitive eater (again) is about re-connecting with our body's natural hunger, fullness, and satisfaction cues, while rejecting chronic dieting and external cues which work to override these cues and trigger overeating.

Intuitive Eating is a [science-based](#) mind-body approach to eating and exercise. It was developed by two registered dietitians, Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch and is based on 10 guiding principles. Although it is often reduced to “the hunger-fullness diet” - it's not a diet at all! There is no calorie or macro counting and no food is off limits. You don't have to follow a meal plan or measure out food portions. In other words, there are no rules and no restrictions. It's very much a behaviour and reflection-oriented approach that helps you learn how best to eat for you – after all no one knows your body better than you!

The 10 Principles of Intuitive Eating

Intuitive Eating is made up of ten core principles. Here is a brief synopsis of each¹.

1. Ditch dieting

The first step is to shift your mindset and recognise diet culture and the damage that [diet culture and dieting](#) do. A common fear is “if I stop dieting, I won't stop eating” but the reality is that the food restriction and deprivation associated with dieting triggers overeating. So, throw out the diet books and magazine articles that promote dieting and diet culture. Unfollow social media accounts that promote dieting and diet behaviours (especially those that make you feel bad about yourself) and follow accounts that share positive food, body and health messaging instead.

2. Honour Your Hunger.

This is about respecting your biological drive (and right) to eat. Eat when you are hungry. Sounds obvious, but if you've been dieting for many years, chances are you may find it difficult to recognise your body's cues that it's time to eat. If you wait too long to eat your next meal or snack, you may end up overeating which is your body's way of saying "I need food NOW!". By tuning in to how hunger feels in your body, you learn to start trusting *your body* to tell you what, when and how much to eat.

3. Make Peace with Food.

Give yourself unconditional permission to eat whatever you want. Stop seeing foods as "good" or "bad" – no one food has the power to make you healthy, just as no one food has the power to make you unhealthy. If you tell yourself you can't or shouldn't have a certain food, you will eventually feel deprived. Feeling deprived can lead to intense cravings for this food and overeating. When you finally eat that food, you're likely to overeat leaving you feeling guilty. This results in a continuous cycle of food deprivation or restriction leading to cravings and overeating leading to feelings of guilt leading to food deprivation and restriction.

4. Challenge your inner critique.

Your inner critique is the voice in your head that says "you shouldn't eat that" or "if you eat that, you'll have to earn it with exercise". It's the result of chronic dieting. Your inner critique wants you to continue following the unreasonable rules of dieting and prevents you from seeing eating as a normal, pleasurable activity. Challenging your inner critique by reframing these thoughts is an important step towards becoming an intuitive eater.

5. Feel Your Fullness.

This step is about tuning in to your body's cues while you are eating and learning to recognise when you are satisfied. Again, if you've been dieting for many years, chances are you may find it difficult to recognise your body's cues that you are satisfied. It may take some practice to recognise these. Look out for signs that you are beginning to feel satisfied by pausing part way through the meal and asking yourself how hungry/full you feel.

6. Rediscover the Joy of Eating.

Prioritise pleasure and satisfaction as essential to your eating experience. When you eat what you really want, in an environment that is inviting, the pleasure you experience helps you feel satisfied and content.

7. Cope With Your Emotions Without Using Food.

Eating for reasons other than physical hunger is a common way of trying to deal with unpleasant feelings and emotions like anxiety, sadness, anger, boredom etc. Food may be a comfort in the short-term, but it's not a long-term solution. Find a number of constructive, kind and nurturing ways to help you cope with these emotions.

8. Respect Your Body.

We are often so quick to judge ourselves and criticize our bodies. Learning to respect your body is an important step in becoming an intuitive eater. If you are too critical of your body and don't accept yourself as you are, it's hard to ditch dieting. Start by thinking of and being grateful for all the great things your body does for you.

9. Exercise and Feel the Difference.

Forget punishing workout programmes. Do something you actually enjoy and shift your focus to how it feels to move your body, rather than the calorie-burning effect of exercise. Whether you opt for a walk, yoga or swimming, this is about finding joy and pleasure in simply moving your body and recognising how great it makes you feel. Perhaps you feel more energised, maybe you notice you sleep better. If you focus on how it feels it can change your whole perspective on moving.

10. Honour Your Health with Gentle Nutrition.

Once you've worked through the other principles of Intuitive Eating, it's time to embrace gentle nutrition. Choose foods that feel good and nourish your body, mind and soul. Focus on choosing a variety of foods you like, how these foods make you feel, in addition to how tasty and satisfying they are to you. You don't have to eat "perfectly" to be healthy. It's what you eat over time that's important.

¹ Adapted from [the 10 principles of Intuitive Eating by Tribole and Resch](#)

Are you interested in learning more about Intuitive Eating?

I work with clients face-to face and virtually, helping women and their families develop a healthier relationship with food and their bodies while at the same time helping them rediscover the joy of eating. To find out more about my Intuitive Eating programs click here: [Nourished and Nourished Plus](#).