



Intuitive Eating: Listening to your body's wisdom

Food represents so many things to us—nourishment, comfort, friend, enemy, guilt, pleasure, emptiness, fullness, desire, sensuality. In spite of thousands of books and articles written on the subject, and fad diets that come and go, our population is becoming increasingly unhealthy. Yet, research has shown that dieting does not work, and, in fact, may only make us less healthy. How can we get off the food treadmill, leave concern about dieting behind, and eat wisely?

There is a way: “Intuitive Eating.” Intuitive eating is based on the premise that our body is able to guide us to healthy eating patterns—if we listen to it. So much of our eating is based on routine, social pressures, boredom, anxiety, or emotion that we have often lost our ability to truly listen to what our body needs. When we are eating intuitively we are creating a healthy relationship with our mind and body in which we become the expert in sensing our body's wisdom. We learn to distinguish between physical and emotional sensations. The beauty of this approach is that it transcends traditional dieting. Rather than counting calories or over-emphasizing certain foods, we regulate what we eat and how much we eat based on hunger and satiety. Dieting works against human biology and often results in a craving for the “forbidden” foods, whereas intuitive eating teaches us to work in harmony with our biology by understanding it.

This sounds great in theory, but how can we put it into practice? If we don't concern ourselves with dieting, won't we eat too much “bad” food? It may seem counter-intuitive, but we need to learn how to eat. Here are eight steps to transform your relationship with food:

1) Throw out the taboos

One of the effects of dieting is a physiological and psychological desire to binge on foods designated as “taboo.” In intuitive eating there are no taboos. Once foods are no longer described as “taboo,” most people lose interest in them. When we are committed to recognizing what our bodies really want, most food cravings disappear. Remember, one meal, one snack, or one day of a poor diet will not make you unhealthy. It is what you eat routinely over time. Progress to your goal is what counts.

2) Eat in tune with your body's rhythm

Our body temperature fluctuates predictably during the day--lowest at night when we sleep and rising in the morning until it peaks around noon (along with the sun). It then dips between about two and five pm. Eating in tune with this rhythm enhances our metabolism—the rate at which we burn our calories. The act of eating raises body temperature, so the optimal times to eat our biggest meals are at breakfast and lunch, with a small meal in the evening. That way we burn our food most efficiently, and sleep most soundly because our body temperature needs to fall for us to sleep well. If you want to lose weight, consume most of your calories

during the first two meals. Having a skimpy breakfast and lunch, and then eating ravenously in the evening is a recipe for weight gain, a sluggish day, and poor sleep.

3) Learn to respond to your body's signals in a healthy, positive, nurturing way

This is perhaps the most important principle of intuitive eating. It is when we do not listen to our body's needs that we may harm it. Eating when we are hungry and stopping when we are full is fundamental to eating well. When we eat slowly with awareness and gratitude, our body will let us know when we have had enough before we overload it, and will also let us know what foods are best for us.

4) Eat slowly with awareness and gratitude

About 30% to 40% of our digestive response to our meal is due to how it looks, smells, tastes, and satisfies. If we consume our food without awareness of these factors, we may be metabolizing at only 60% to 70% efficiency. We then become susceptible to various digestive disorders. When we eat too fast or fail to notice our food and our body's response to it, we think we are still hungry and tend to eat too much. When we register satisfaction with our food, we no longer need to fight ourselves about what we eat.

5) Eat in a relaxed manner—breathe!

When we eat under stress, even chronic, low level stress, our metabolism decreases and we burn fewer calories. Anxiety and worry produce stress, and weight gain can result. The antidote is to promote relaxation when we eat. The more we oxygenate ourselves with conscious breathing while we eat, relax, and enjoy ourselves, the better will be our digestion, calorie burn, and nutrient assimilation.

6) Eat the best quality of food

The nutritional and energetic quality of our food is impacted by every step in the food chain--from what farmers place on their fields, to how the food is harvested, shipped, stored, and cooked. When we consume it, we are impacted by its entire history. The higher the quality of our food, the greater its nutritional value. When we consume low quality food laced with preservatives and chemicals, our body registers it as nutritionally deficient and signals us to eat more.

7) Honor your feelings without using food

Unconsciously and consciously, we associate certain foods with emotional attributes based on triggers from our past. We long to eat foods that brought us comfort in another time. Food so often can become a substitute for something we are missing in our lives, leading us to eat foods that don't enhance our health, or eating when we are not hungry. Fear, anxiety, boredom, or sadness are all emotions we experience throughout our lives. Responding to those emotions with eating may provide short-term comfort, but doesn't do anything to solve our problems. Eating to satisfy emotional hunger may make us feel worse as a result.

8) Respect and love your body

We live in a culture that equates thin with beauty, well-being, and success. The first step in countering these false expectations is to accept our genetic heritage and inherent body size and shape. When we accept our bodies, we feel better about who we are, and are then not driven to constant dieting to alter our basic shape.

“Taste and discernment are cousins. They both require you to choose carefully.” --Suzanne Kyra

Suzanne Kyra, M.A., is a Registered Clinical Counselor, international speaker, consultant, and author of Welcome Home to Yourself. Ms Kyra will be speaking on Intuitive Eating as part of Choices Markets' New Year, New You series on February 4, 2009 at the Canadian Memorial Centre for Peace.

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