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# Exploring Intuitive Eating[1]

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Intuitive eating is an eating framework created by two dietitians integrating instinct, emotion, and rational thought. The evidence-based framework was created in 1995 and has over one hundred studies supporting its benefits (Tribole 2019a). Through ten principles, intuitive eating can help individuals become more in tune with the physical sensations of their bodies and adequately meet their biological and physiological needs. Additionally, intuitive eating helps to remove obstacles such as food rules and thought patterns instilled by diet culture (Tribole 2019a). This article explains the ten principles of intuitive eating in detail to help people searching for peace with food find practices that honor their physical and mental health (Tribole 2019a).

## Principle 1: Reject the Diet Mentality

If you pick up any magazine, turn to any TV channel, or open any social media app, you will find at least one diet or diet product advertisement. It is abundantly clear that dieting is promoted everywhere. This has led many to have what is now known as the diet mentality, or beliefs about food that are centered around dieting (Tribole and Resch 2019). However, according to the original intuitive eating professional and Registered Dietitian Evelyn Tribole, dieting offers false hope of rapid, easy, and permanent weight loss (Tribole 2019b). Additionally, dieting may have serious negative effects on your mental and physical health (French and Jeffery 1994).

Intuitive eating is about rejecting dieting rules and behaviors and choosing to listen to one's body. To do so, we must rid ourselves of all things dieting: dieting books, products, blogs, rules, beliefs, and practices (Tribole 2019b). This is much easier said than done, mainly because we've been conditioned to believe we should diet to look a certain way in society. Once we reject this diet mentality, we will be able to rediscover and find freedom in intuitive eating. Consider:

- **Dieting History:** Have diets really worked well in the past, or are you only remembering the temporary weight loss you experienced (Tribole and Resch 2019)?
- **Cost of Dieting:** Has dieting ever negatively affected your social life, relationships, eating behavior, mood, time, preoccupation with food, and money (Tribole and Resch 2019)?
- **Coping through Dieting:** When you felt out of control in the past, have you turned to dieting to help you cope or have a sense of control in your life? Has dieting ever been a way for you to distract yourself from the stresses of life (Tribole and Resch 2019)?
- **Diet Behaviors:** Are there any behaviors still driven by diet patterns? Do you have any lingering dieting thoughts or behaviors from previous dieting experiences (Tribole 2019b)? Find one thought or behavior that has kept you in the "diet mentality"; try letting go of it today or this week. Maybe it's counting your calories, macros, or points. Perhaps you'll try not weighing yourself or weighing yourself less often (Tribole and Resch 2019).
- **Letting Go:** If letting go of trying to lose weight causes too much stress right now, try putting it on the back burner. You can focus on other priorities in your life while acknowledging the desire for weight loss (Tribole 2019b).
- **Rejecting Diet Mentality:** At what moment did it click? Was there a point where you felt the puzzle pieces finally all fit together (Tribole and Resch 2019)?

## Principle 2: Honor Your Hunger

When a plant is wilting, what do you do? Water it. Like a plant, your body is always in tune with what you need and will give signals when you need more fuel. We need to care for and nurture our bodies to be at our best. The first step towards caring and nurturing oneself is listening. It's easy to ignore your hunger cues in a society that encourages dieting, but ignoring your hunger will only increase it. The next time you eat, you'll feel more inclined

to overeat and eat unintentionally (Kalm and Semba 2005).

Build on and strengthen the connection between your body, mind, and food by eating intentionally and intuitively. Intentional and intuitive eating means listening to when your body is hungry and full. This may mean that some days you are hungrier than others, and that's okay! Forcing yourself to eat and not to eat are harmful to the body and mindset. Here is how to honor your hunger cues:

- **Be Aware:** Do you struggle to stay focused? Feel a headache? Our brain requires food to continuously send signals that keep our bodies functional (Medicine 2021). Knowing how your body sends you cues is the first step in building trust and a healthy relationship with your body and food.
- **Recognize:** The feel-good foods will make you feel energized and satisfied. The not-so-good-feeling foods may make you feel drowsy, give you a stomachache, or simply not satisfy you. Are these foods part of your daily meals? What are some ways you can incorporate more of the feel-good foods?
- **Feed Your Soul:** You don't need to restrict yourself to eating only healthy food. Food can bring people together, lift your mood, and bring comfort. In addition to eating feel-good food, eat food that you enjoy.
- **Self-Care:** Taking care of your mental and physical health will help you feel more in tune with what you need. Practicing listening to your hunger is only one of the many things you can do to strengthen your relationship with food. Listening to the needs of your whole self will add to the connection of your body, mind, and food.

## Principle 3: Make Peace with Food

The third principle revolves around the concept of permitting yourself to eat foods you enjoy and allowing yourself to eat without rules and restrictions. There is no need to mentally classify food into "good" and "bad" categories or find a specific reason to eat a forbidden food (Tribole and Resch 2019).

Living in Western society can influence our perceptions and attitudes toward food. Early research discovered that compared to Eastern countries, Americans were more likely to correlate food with the effectiveness of health on self and others and worry about the fattening effect while negatively associating food with enjoyment. Given the significantly higher health and weight concerns and diet modifications in Americans, Americans were expected to be less likely to consider themselves as "healthy" eaters (Rozin et al. 1999). Americans tend to classify their foods and nutrients within a "good" or "bad" dichotomy, regardless of the amounts consumed. In addition, Americans have shown to display confounding concepts related to the calorie content of food, such as the belief that high-caloric foods in small quantities have more calories than low-caloric foods in greater amounts (Rozin, Ashmore, and Markwith 1996). When we eliminate the good vs. bad food categories, we can start to listen to what our bodies want. Food is neutral!

Restricting a particular food can lead to intense feelings of deprivation that can build into uncontrollable cravings and binge eating. For example, restrained eaters consumed more chocolate. They experienced more food cravings when they were chocolate-deprived and were more likely to eat the craved food compared to unrestricted eaters (Polivy, Coleman, and Herman 2005). Deprivation of any food can ultimately negatively affect food cravings and overeating, especially in restrained eaters. If you are not sure where to start on making peace with food, here are five steps you can try:

- **Make a List:** What foods look and taste good to you? Write down all the foods you do eat and wish to eat.
- **Review Your List:** Put a checkmark on all the food you consume and circle the remaining foods you have been restricting—whether consciously (i.e., on a diet) or subconsciously (i.e., through food rules, keeping food out of your house, etc.).
- **Choose One Food:** Start by choosing an off-limit food that feels least likely to give you anxiety. Purchase that food. Permit yourself to eat this food whenever you want.
- **Use Your Senses:** Your senses will help guide you on whether you like what you are eating. Pay attention to any feelings (i.e., anxiety, shame, guilt, joy, etc.). Journaling about the experience may be helpful.
- **Give Permission:** Continue to give yourself unconditional permission and use your senses to savor it each time. It is normal to feel like you are overeating at first. Eventually, you will get to a state where your body will recognize and trust that you have access to that food, and overeating will gradually be less frequent.

## Principle 4: Challenge the Food Police

"Are you eating that?" If you've ever fallen victim to this question, you have had a run-in with the "food police." This type of person may label foods as "good" or "bad," or perhaps they may monitor your food intake. Often, this voice can be our own. We may judge our food choices as right or wrong or as "good" or "bad." These perceptions of food have been ingrained in our minds from a young age. The root of personal food beliefs or perceptions could be from your parents' teaching, friends, social interactions, commercials, or even current dieting trends. It could be assumed that if you overeat on the weekend, you should eat less during the week. Or, if you overate for dinner the night before, you should skip breakfast to make up for the overindulgence. Overly monitoring or judging your food intake can be harmful to sustaining a healthy eating pattern. It's essential to address these perceptions and attitudes toward food to embrace intuitive eating fully. If you want to "challenge the food police" within, try to understand your own "rules" or beliefs about the food you are eating.

- **Understand your own food beliefs and rules**: What are they? Try writing them down. How do these beliefs and attitudes about food affect your eating habits? How do they relate to your body and your health? Where did you first hear these messages, and how did they become reinforced?
- **Flip the script**: Instead of using language like "should" or "shouldn't," use words like "can" or "okay." For example, it's okay to eat when I'm hungry.
- **Change your inner voice**: When you begin to hear the "food police," voice positive affirmations to combat the negativity. For example, "I am learning to trust myself around food," or "this is a process, and I am learning to overcome past food rules."

## Principle 5: Feel Your Fullness

Dieting is very prevalent, so it is no surprise that many people have grown accustomed to using dieting beliefs and behaviors when eating. Perhaps it's believing that you can only have a single portion of food or limiting the calories you consume. Dieting thoughts and behaviors are so ingrained in society that they have become a part of our daily eating habits. Intuitive eating calls for the end of this way of living (Ogden et al. 2013). Instead of having dieting-centered rules around food, the principle "feel your fullness" calls us to rediscover intuitive eating by showing us how to listen to our bodies (Shimizu, Payne, and Wansink 2010). It is referred to as "rediscovering" intuitive eating because we were all once intuitive eaters.

Our innate instinct at birth is to eat intuitively (MacMillan 2018). We cry for food when hungry, and we stop eating when we are satisfied or full. Over the years, however, we have been bombarded with messages about dieting, weight loss, and body modification. We often stop listening to our bodies for what, when, and how much to eat because of the pressures around us (MacMillan 2018). So, we must "rediscover" how to feel our fullness with intuitive eating. To feel your fullness, you need to trust your body's satiety signals and allow yourself to eat the foods that you desire (Tribole and Resch 2019). To tune into your body's signals about hunger and fullness, eating when hungry is the first step (Tribole and Resch 2019). Then, during your snack or meal, listen in to see how you feel. Take pauses to focus on how you feel if necessary, and try to eat until you feel satisfied or comfortably full.

It is also important to remember that nobody is perfect. Sometimes, we may eat past fullness, or we may not eat enough. That is okay. Learning to give yourself grace and forgiveness is a significant part of trusting yourself and your body with your hunger and fullness cues. Steps to practice include:

- **Eat without Distractions**: Is there anything you tend to do while eating that can be a distraction from listening to your body's hunger and fullness cues? Do you eat while watching TV, scrolling through social media, writing, reading a book, driving, working, or studying? Do these tasks keep you from being able to focus on how you feel while eating fully? Perhaps consider eating without distractions (Tribole and Resch 2019).
- **Enjoy Flavors and Textures:** Sometimes, we eat too quickly, which may not allow us enough time to listen to our body's wants and needs. Instead of rushing through your meals, try spending extra time enjoying the flavors and textures of your food. This can give you the time to really tune in to your body and feel your fullness (Tribole and Resch 2019).
- **Pause and Check In:** Measure how you feel at different times while eating. Pause if you need to. Are you still hungry? Are you satisfied with what you ate? Do you still want to eat more (Tribole 2019f)?
- **Be Patient:** Learning to respond to your body's hunger and fullness cues requires much practice. Be forgiving and kind to yourself when learning, and be patient—

feeling your fullness will get easier with practice over time (Tribole and Resch 2012).

## Principle 6: Discover the Satisfaction

Have you ever eaten your usual portion for dinner and still not felt completely satisfied? Has eating just become an action you rush through while still replying to emails at work or watching television? Maybe you ate your meal, but an hour later, you felt hungry again and, possibly, frustrated at how this could be. Although eating is essential for survival and health, it is much more than just consuming food to reduce hunger and sustain our bodies. The experience of eating can be a pleasurable and satisfying experience when we eat the foods we desire in an inviting environment. Intuitive eating allows us to lean into the foods we crave and the ones that make our bodies feel good.

The environment we eat in impacts how much food we eat and our feelings of satiety. In an environment with little distractions, we can fully appreciate food for its texture, aroma, flavor, and visual appeal. Several studies have shown that food intake increases when participants are distracted by television (Mathur 2015). Similar findings have been reported due to other distractions, including listening to music or even a story (Rumsey 2018). When our focus is directed elsewhere, we are less likely to notice hunger and fullness cues. Not only are our personal decisions to eat among obvious distractions influencing us, but also subtle environmental cues can sway our eating habits. Shimizu et al. found that when the same foods were presented along with "meal cues" rather than "snack cues," hungry participants ate 27.9% more calories (Shimizu, Payne, and Wansink 2010). Meal cues included table settings with ceramic plates, glasses, silverware, and cloth napkins, whereas snack cues included paper plates, plastic cups, and no utensils. Other cues to be mindful of are the lighting in a room, social pressures, and plate size.

When we are in touch with what our bodies are craving, we can prepare a meal that will fulfill our food desires and consume it in a mindful way to leave us satisfied with the experience. Intuitive eating helps us find a comfortable level of fullness, feel content with our meals, and move on to the business and distractions in other aspects of life.

## Principle 7: Cope with Your Emotions with Kindness

Principle 7 of intuitive eating is "cope with your emotions without using food" (Tribole 2019h). Anger, jealousy, boredom, sadness, and stress are all feelings that most of us have experienced at some point in our lives. Maybe you have had a challenging day at work or school, unexpected expenses, or perhaps you just feel like the weight of the world is on your shoulders. Each one of these emotions has the potential to trigger a reaction and a feeling like you are out of control. Food will not be able to solve any of these feelings; we must find ways to cope with our emotions without food.

When a negative emotion arises, emotional eaters tend to use food as a healing mechanism or as a tool to suppress feelings of fear, anxiety, or loneliness (Bruch 1964). Running from these emotions is a short-term escape route but not a long-term solution. When we avoid negative feelings and thoughts, they have the potential to occur more intensely and more frequently over time. This action, in turn, can cause eating to become more automatic and habitual when these emotions arise (Geliebter and Aversa 2003).

Recent research findings show that emotional eating is positively associated with weight gain, stress, and depression (Konttinen et al. 2010). On the other hand, mindfulness or intuitive eating has a strong inverse association with weight gain, anxiety, depression, and emotional instability (Wegner et al. 1987; Mantzios et al. 2015; Hofmann et al. 2010). So how do we transition from emotional eating? By learning to cope with our emotions with kindness.

To combat these negative feelings when they arise, being more mindful of both food and emotions can help us identify triggers and find better ways to cope using the following questions:

1. **"What am I feeling right now?"**

Identifying our initial feelings can help connect eating with hunger and satiety rather than feelings. For example, you finish your tasks for the day, and you get up to reach for a snack in the pantry. What are you feeling? Are you hungry, or are you bored? Even if you ultimately decide to eat at that moment, taking that pause and allowing yourself the time to think makes it a more mindful experience.

2. **"What can I do to fulfill this need?"**

If you decide you are bored, maybe you could listen to some music, read a book, walk, or practice yoga. There are a variety of coping strategies for each emotion that do not include food. Creating a list of activities or coping strategies on hand may be beneficial when we find ourselves in a negative thought or emotional spiral.

Keep in mind that it is entirely normal and perfectly okay to eat for emotional reasons occasionally. Food is impactful in many cultures and societies and is often used to soothe or connect. There is nothing wrong with having an emotional attachment to food such as cake on birthdays. It becomes an issue when food becomes our only outlet and when we allow emotions to take over and drive us to behaviors that lead to adverse outcomes—having ways to cope with our emotions that do not include food keeps it from becoming the epicenter of our lives.

## Principle 8: Respect Your Body

Accept who you are and where you are at right now. You are worth it! You deserve great things! You deserve to be happy and healthy in your own body. What does it look like to respect your body?

- Wear clothes that honor your size. Get rid of clothes that do not fit.
- Do not compare yourself to others. Address your social media habits. If you follow someone who makes you feel bad about yourself, unfollow them. Begin following someone new who celebrates diverse bodies and sizes.
- Reflect on the personal qualities that you admire about yourself. They should have nothing to do with size or weight. Feel free to ask your best friend or a family member if you cannot think of anything.

## Principle 9: Movement—Feel the Difference

Do you see exercise as an obligation or a chore? Do you force yourself to exercise to look a particular way? Exercise is a tool some people use to "earn" the foods they want to eat, "burn off" the food they have already eaten or control the way their bodies look. However, movement has so many benefits, and controlling the size of one's body should not be one of them.

What if you started to associate physical activity with joy and anticipation instead? Researchers have discovered that joy and passion are the main factors driving physical activity (Angel 2018). These findings highlight the importance of finding a physical activity that you enjoy. So, if you have dreaded exercising in the past and had negative feelings surrounding it, it might be time to shift the focus and learn how to find pleasure in movement.

Regular movement has many health benefits that have nothing to do with how your body looks. Those benefits include but are not limited to increased energy levels (Puetz, Flowers, and O'Connor 2008), reduced stress (Childs and de Wit 2014), enhanced mood and better mental health (Chan et al. 2019), and improved cognitive ability and memory (Alghadir, Gabr, and Al-Eisa 2016; Alves et al. 2014). Intuitive eating is predominantly centered on behaviors around food and eating, but having a healthy relationship with physical activity is just as important because it impacts nutritional needs and preferences and overall quality of life. Here are some ways that might help you see movement from a different perspective:

- **Shift the Focus:** Take some time to examine your beliefs regarding exercise. Which are negative and which are positive? When you view physical activity only to manage weight, it becomes a "should" or an obligation. Practice shifting your focus to the enjoyment of moving your body instead of how many calories you are burning (Tribole and Resch 2019). When you move in a way that brings joy and excitement, you are genuinely nourishing your body and mind.
- **Listen to Your Body Signals:** Have you ever noticed that you get the urge to get up and stretch after sitting for a while? You might feel restless and feel stored energy that needs to be released. That is a signal your body sends you that it wants to move. On other days, your body might feel sore or fatigued, which would signal that you need some rest.
- **Practice Mindful Movement:** Pay attention to how your body feels when you move to prevent injury and pain. A good activity may have moments of discomfort, but pain is a sign we need to stop the activity and rest or heal. All bodies are different, and each of us needs various activities and levels of intensity. Try not to compare yourself with others. Instead, find what works best for you and your unique body.
- **Try New Activities:** Variety can keep things interesting and exciting. List the activities that you enjoy or that you would like to try. Do you feel energized and empowered after a yoga class, a hike in the mountains, a stroll

through the park with a friend, or perhaps gardening? Think back to your favorite childhood activities that you engaged in because they were fun. Don't be afraid to channel your childhood self and give them a try again.

- **Find Ways to Move:** Exercise doesn't have to be all or none. Movement can be incorporated throughout the day rather than for a set period. Find easy ways to incorporate activity into your everyday life. For example, take stairs instead of an elevator, take several stretch breaks throughout the day, or go for a sunset walk with family or friends.

## Principle 10: Honor Your Health—Gentle Nutrition

The last principle, whether you call it "gentle nutrition" or "eat to live," is honoring your health through intuitive eating. You must have thoroughly understood your relationship with food, mind, and body before exploring this impactful principle. If you feel this principle describes you, you are on the path to intuitive eating. If you think this is not you, this principle will wait for when you are ready.

Your health is affected by what you eat consistently over time and not one meal. To honor your health via this method is to choose food that honors your well-being and speaks to your palate to encourage a feeling of ease and good health ultimately.

**Some helpful questions to ask yourself if you are ready for gentle nutrition (Tribole 2019k) are:**

- Do I eat a variety of foods that include adequate protein, fat, and carbohydrates and are good sources of vitamins and minerals?
- Am I choosing whole grains, vegetables, and fruit for my meals and snacks?
- How did a particular meal or snack make me feel physically and emotionally after and during the eating process? Do I want to feel this way again? Did this meal or snack make me feel nourished, sustained, strong, or cared for?
- Are my food choices supporting my health concerns?

If you are yet convinced, it is worth mentioning that gentle nutrition is also backed by science in promoting a positive body image and improvements in health status outcomes (Hazzard et al. 2021). This principle teaches us that healthy diets vary in composition but most often include foods from all the food groups (vegetables, fruits, grains, protein, and dairy) in amounts appropriate for all stages of our lives. This process prioritizes both what we need and want for sustainable, quality living.

## Conclusion

For anyone searching to make peace with food and their body, intuitive eating can help you get there. It has been shown to improve physical health and mental health. However, following the ten principles of intuitive eating can be challenging. This is especially true in today's society, filled with diet culture and food trends. When put into practice, intuitive eating helps you honor your mind and body and provides you with a way to achieve total freedom from dieting.

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