

The Anti-Diet: Intuitive Eating

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Intuitive eating encourages internal regulation of the eating experience (REF). Unlike many traditional diets, intuitive eating encourages people to listen to and honor their internal cues for hunger and fullness. It also discourages food judgments that some foods are “good” and others are “bad.”

Rather than having people try to override specific food cravings in order to follow strict diet rules, intuitive eating embraces the body’s natural ability to regulate food intake. Intuitive eating promotes gentle nutrition in a weight-neutral manner, which is consistent with the HAES approach.

The principles of intuitive eating encourage people to observe, without judgment, the way foods make them feel. That includes honoring hunger and satiety cues, noticing energy levels and identifying when food is used for comfort (Bacon & Aphramor 2011; Tribole & Resch 2012). While diets promote feelings of guilt and shame from failure, intuitive eating embraces the flexibility of the human experience. The goal of intuitive eating is not to eat perfectly, but rather to support a more comfortable relationship to food (Tribole & Resch 2012).

The intuitive eating model is based on studies indicating that children choose foods that meet their nutritional needs without external guidance (Bacon & Aphramor 2011; Bombak 2014). This body of research suggests that intuitive eating enhances nutrient intake, reduces eating-disorder symptoms and does not cause weight gain (Bacon & Aphramor 2011; Tribole & Resch 2012). The lack of weight gain that occurs with intuitive eating is worth noting, because it’s a point that has drawn concern from critics.

4 Key Concepts of Intuitive Eating

- 1. Restore body trust.** Dieting enforces strict rules based on external cues. In contrast, intuitive eating restores a sense of body trust. Helping clients respect their internal hunger cues and fullness cues is key to introducing those clients to intuitive eating. While diets say wait for the next planned mealtime, intuitive eating says show yourself compassion by feeding yourself when it feels physically necessary.
- 2. Make peace with food.** Rather than labeling high-calorie, low-nutrient foods as “bad,” intuitive eating encourages a neutral perspective on the moral value of foods. Letting go of self- and diet-imposed judgments of foods can help heal clients’ relationships with food.
- 3. Address emotional eating.** People often get temporary emotional relief from eating, followed by a realization that their problem remains. Intuitive eating encourages followers to show themselves compassion by entertaining a solution that is unrelated to food and that directly addresses their emotional challenges.

4. **4. Practice gentle nutrition.** Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch, authors of (St. Martin's Griffin 2012), explain: "We define healthy eating as having a healthy balance of foods having a healthy relationship with food." The key to practicing gentle nutrition is releasing the moral judgments associated with food that are so ubiquitous in diet culture. The pursuit of gentle nutrition should be the last step to embracing intuitive eating, after clients have healed their relationship to food.
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