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What is intuitive eating – and can it improve your relationship with food?

Diet culture has reigned supreme for decades, telling us what to eat, how much, and when. It can be hard to break free of the vicious cycle that such restriction can create. So some nutritionists are now promoting 'intuitive eating' as an alternative. But what is intuitive eating and can this anti-diet concept really reset your problematic relationship with food? Or is it just another buzzword?

What is intuitive eating?

The term 'intuitive eating' may only now be gaining mainstream attention, but intuitive eating was first coined in 1995, in a [book](#) by registered dietician Elyse Resch and nutritionist Evelyn Tribole. The main idea is to stop dieting and instead simply nourish and move your body when it requires it. Eat a variety of healthy foods, and make exercise part of your routine, rather than a punishment.

Intuitive eating also urges us to change our language and behaviour around food – things aren't 'good' or 'bad' for us; they're just 'foods'. Ultimately, intuitive eating is about being aware that it's up to you to make conscious decisions to eat what makes you feel good.

Our relationship with food

Nutritionist [Dr Laura Thomas](#) has had enough of the war on food. In her recent book [Just Eat It](#) she explores her own experiences surrounding diet culture and disordered eating.

"The reasons our relationship with food becomes messy and complicated aren't straightforward," says Thomas. "Body dissatisfaction, diet rules that get lodged in our heads, being on the receiving end of body shaming or weight-related teasing, genetic factors, trauma and abuse, and our personality types can all lead to disordered eating."

And because of this, learning to let go of diet messaging and trust your body can be a difficult thing at first, Thomas admits. Both external and internal pressures can lead to [stress](#) and [low self-esteem](#), which can be a tricky cycle to break.

"When you strip back all the noise and the rules and the restrictions, it is much easier to tap into the messages that your body is sending you," Thomas explains, who was sceptical herself when she first came across the term 'intuitive eating'.

Intuitive eating principles

There are 10 intuitive eating principles, focused around trusting your body and learning to respond appropriately to hunger and fullness. In theory, if you're in tune with your body and aware of your hunger cues, you should be able to tell what you need to eat and when to feel good.

1. Reject the diet mentality
2. Recognise your hunger
3. Make peace with food
4. Challenge the 'food police'
5. Feel your fullness
6. Discover the satisfaction factor
7. Cope with your feelings without using food
8. Respect your body
9. Exercise and feel the difference
10. Honour your health

These intuitive eating principles sound simple, practically common sense, but it can be far trickier in practice.

"Unconditional permission to eat what you want is an essential tenet of intuitive eating. However, if you do that without any regard to how food makes you feel, then it's not going to be a particularly pleasant way to eat."

She cautions that in the short term, intuitive eating could make you gravitate towards foods that have traditionally been off-limits; foods that are fine in moderation but won't make you feel great if you eat them too often.

"You need to learn to trust that your body is not just going to want to eat doughnuts all day long because ultimately that won't feel very good. I often ask people to imagine what it would be like eating a doughnut for every single meal and snack for the whole day, they quickly realise that it's not a very satisfying way to eat and so you will gradually gravitate back towards a healthy balance of food."

In order to make your body feel great, a [varied diet](#) full of whole grains, healthy fats and protein is required. Intuitive eating teaches us to look at these, and other, types of food as ways to make our bodies function at their best, and not as numbers and calories that need to be counted.

The influence of diet culture

Unfortunately, diet culture is still rife, especially on social media. Celebrities promoting products like appetite-restricting lollipops, or meal replacement shakes to achieve the 'perfect' body, pop up on our feeds all the time. This can have serious implications, particularly for young women, who are more susceptible to developing an eating disorder like anorexia or bulimia.

Eating disorder charity [Beat](#) states that 1.6 million people in the UK suffer from eating disorders, with many more possibly going undiagnosed. Could intuitive eating help here?

"I wouldn't say intuitive eating is focused on body image, but there is a knock-on effect," explains Thomas. "My clients will report to me: 'I'm feeling better about other aspects of my life where I can apply things like self-compassion, not just eating'."

Body appreciation and compassion starts from within, Thomas believes. Practising [mindfulness](#) techniques can help you develop coping mechanisms that don't revolve around food.

However, jumping straight from an eating disorder into intuitive eating might not be beneficial. When implementing something that has 'no rules', people in recovery can easily feel overwhelmed and out of control. It's important to speak with your doctor first about intuitive eating so that they can help to figure out what is best for you, both physically and mentally.

Making healthy choices

If you're a failed dieter who feels they have tried every trick in the book with still no results, then intuitive eating may seem like a welcome relief from all of your woes. But it may be a difficult concept for some, as it doesn't promise quick-fix results. Intuitive eating isn't about losing weight, it's all about building a long-lasting relationship with your body and trusting it to make healthy choices. If rapid [weight loss](#) is what you desire, you'll be disappointed.

"And for a lot of people intuitive eating is not that simple," points out dietician [Dr Sarah Schenker](#). "They overeat when they are bored, sad, for comfort. And these are hard behaviours to break. Intuitive eating requires some self-discipline and sadly that is what a lot of failed dieters lack.

"Others might be better suited to a set of rules (Weight Watchers or Slimming World). Everyone is different which is why there isn't a single solution for all."

Self-love is the answer

The journey to a healthy body and mind is never an easy one. The most important thing is to look after yourself and [not beat yourself up](#) if something doesn't work.

"They tell you to listen to your body but then they don't really tell you how," says Thomas. "I would definitely do a little bit of homework on intuitive eating so that you can get more of a sense of what it actually is and what it actually means."

Figuring out how to properly fuel your body to reach whatever goals you may have will likely take some time and patience. Mixing in research and support with a whole heap of self-appreciation could be a great recipe for those looking to free themselves from unsustainable diets and start to appreciate life outside of what they're eating.

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