



What is Intuitive Eating?

There's no calorie counting and no forbidden foods—so can this plan really be healthy? We spoke with the dietitian who wrote the book (literally), and then asked our resident expert about the pros and cons.

There's one eating plan—not a diet, its founders are quick to point out—that's had some serious staying power. It's called “intuitive eating” and was coined by Evelyn Tribole, RD, and Elyse Resch, RDN, in the 1990s.

In short, intuitive eating means breaking free from the on-and-off cycle of dieting and learning to eat mindfully and without guilt. There's no calorie counting or restrictions on certain foods, but there are some guidelines that make up the core philosophy of this method.

Here's an overview of intuitive eating's 10 principles, and why you might want to give them a try.



1

Reject the diet mentality.

The bottom line, Tribole says, is that dieting isn't sustainable. So the first principle of intuitive eating is to stop dieting—and to stop believing that quick-fix plans can deliver lasting results. That includes throwing away diet books and magazine articles that promise fast weight loss, and rejecting any meal plans that dictate what or how much you can eat.

2

Honor your hunger.

One reason dieting doesn't work, Tribole says, is because it can leave you feeling deprived and physically hungry—which can trigger bingeing and overeating. So instead of counting calories or watching portions, she says, simply pay attention to your body's hunger cues.

That means eating a sufficient amount of calories and carbohydrates to keep your body “fed” and satiated. Once you learn to recognize these signals in your own body, Tribole says, it becomes much easier to trust your instincts and repair unhealthy relationships with food.

3

Make peace with food.

On diets, “certain foods are promoted as being forbidden—which tends to make them even more tempting,” says Tribole. “When you finally eat those foods, you binge and feel guilty, which creates a vicious cycle.” That's why one principle of intuitive eating is to give yourself “unconditional permission to eat.”

You stop and ask yourself, ‘Do I really want this now?’ And often, people realize they don't really want that food that was forbidden before; they just got caught up in society telling them they couldn't have it.”

4

Challenge the food police.

Intuitive eating describes the “food police” as those voices in your head that tell you it's good to eat fewer calories and it's bad to eat dessert.

These food police can be real people, too, says Tribole: friends, family and acquaintances who offer up judgment and “advice” about what and how you're eating. In either case, she says, “chasing them away” is an important step in embracing intuitive eating.

5

Respect your fullness.

It's important to eat when you're hungry, but it's also important to stop when those hunger cues are no longer present.

It can help to pause in the middle of your meal or snack to assess your current state: How full do you feel? Are you still eating to feed your hunger, or are you eating out of distraction, boredom or stress? “We all have the power to listen to our bodies in this way, but many people don't realize it,” says Tribole.

6

Discover the satisfaction factor.

The satisfaction factor has to do with noticing and appreciating the taste and texture of food, but also the environment in which you're eating.

"When you can bring the pleasure and joy back to eating," says Tribole, "you can truly feel satisfied after a meal and move on and enjoy the rest of your life, rather than continue to eat for other reasons."

To put this into practice, Tribole recommends starting with tuning in during just one meal a day. "Make it a sacred time in which you eat without distraction," she says. "Place your awareness on one aspect of the food, whether it's the texture or the taste or the visual aspect." If even that sounds too difficult, concentrate on just the first bite, the middle bite and the last bite.

7

Honor your feelings without using food.

Tribole says that people often overeat because of anxiety, loneliness, boredom, anger or stress. That's why it's important to get to the root of these problems, and to find ways to nurture yourself and resolve those issues without turning to food.

"It's not always big, extreme emotions that are causing overeating, either," says Tribole. "Sometimes it's as mundane as being bored because you're eating while distracted." But being more mindful in all aspects of life—with your food and with your emotions—can help you sort out those overlaps.

8

Respect your body.

Intuitive eating is also about body acceptance: That means feeling good about the body you were meant to have—not striving for unrealistic expectations about how much weight you can lose or what size jeans you can squeeze into.

9

Exercise: Feel the difference.

You don't have to go to the gym every day while following an intuitive eating approach, but it is important to move your body on a regular basis. "It's not about finding the exercise that burns the most calories or the most fat," says Tribole. "It's about finding something that's sustainable and that you enjoy."

10

Honor your health with gentle nutrition.

Despite the fact that intuitive eating preaches an "eat what you want" mentality, that doesn't mean its founders don't care about good nutrition. In fact, their final word of advice is to make food choices that honor your health, as well as your taste buds.

"We're not throwing the baby out with the bathwater: we still encourage healthy eating, but we know that comes naturally when you embrace the other principles first," says Tribole.