

The Hunger

games

Lottie Storey discusses
how intuitive eating
teaches us to reject diet
culture and place trust
in what we eat.

RECLAIM YOUR APPETITE

Close your eyes. Imagine a vast dining table, laid with beautiful china and polished cutlery. There are flowers. Cut-glass goblets. Crisp linen napkins. The food appears in front of you – a lavish banquet that seems to stretch as far as the eye can see. All your favourite foods are here. There's lobster and oysters. A roast dinner, steaming gravy in a jug nearby. Hot buttered toast. Pizza with melting mozzarella. Strawberries and cream. Lasagne and buttery garlic bread. Wobbly pink blancmange. Fish and chips. Ice cream in cones with chocolate flakes and sprinkles.

How does it make you feel? For most of us, a childlike excitement bubbles up. It's like a dream, like Christmas, your birthday – all three at once. But for anyone who's ever dieted, what follows are those familiar conflicted feelings. We want to tuck in and enjoy the pleasure of food without restriction but we're, well, scared. We know there may be guilt attached. What's the catch, we wonder? Maybe we haven't been 'good enough' this week. Maybe we haven't met our 10,000 step daily target. Maybe we'll start eating and won't be able to stop, bursting out of our clothes like a bacchanalian hulk in heels.

Enter intuitive eating. A term first coined in the mid-90s by two dietitians in the US, intuitive

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eating turns diet culture on its head. Instead of putting the responsibility for our food intake into the hands of some external body (such as a diet company, celebrity chefs, a food conglomerate, or – let's be honest here – the patriarchy), intuitive eating teaches you to reject diet culture, instead reconnecting with your body's own hunger and fullness cues. You eat when you're hungry and stop when you're full. Sounds straightforward? There's more.

The ten principles of intuitive eating as coined by Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch back in 1995 were designed to help you make peace with food, free yourself from chronic dieting forever, and rediscover the pleasures of eating. The holy grail, basically. Here's Elyse: "Intuitive eating offers you the freedom to trust your inner wisdom to tell you what to eat, when to eat, and how much to eat. No diet could ever know the answers to those questions. They come from within."

For many of us, the idea of trusting our inner wisdom is problematic in itself. Whisper it, but there is some twisted comfort in delegating our eating habits to an external force (even one without ►



Photograph left: Kristina Bratko, above: Cuyal (both Unsplash)



a background in nutrition). Those celebrity diet books spell out exactly what we have to do and we follow it to the letter. Our Fitbit buzzes triumphantly, meaning we can relax (until tomorrow). But, eventually, the weight creeps back on. Spoiler: the truth is that diets just don't work long term. All the scientific research tells us this and more – in fact, diets may even cause damage. As well as the likelihood of gaining back more weight than you lost, recent studies into type 2 diabetes suggest that ignoring your hunger cues can put you at greater risk of developing the disease. Other studies show that stress (and who doesn't find dieting stressful?) can damage your body, and – most mind-boggling of all – that we absorb more nutrients from the foods we really enjoy than meals we grudgingly munch through. Rice cake, anyone?

When we are told how to eat, breaking free of the rules can be intimidating.

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So, reject diet culture, eat when you're hungry and you're golden? Not quite. One woman on a mission to bring intuitive eating into our collective consciousness is registered nutritionist, Laura Thomas, PhD. With a hugely engaged audience on Instagram, the focus of her work is entirely evidence-based nutritional science. “People often think that intuitive eating simply means to not diet anymore,” says Laura. “Most of us are naturally intuitive eaters, but after years of dieting, food guilt, and body bashing, we get disconnected from those signals; reconnecting with them can be quite a lengthy process. I often have clients tell me that they read *Intuitive Eating*, but they still struggled to apply it to their own lives.” The solution? “This is where a registered nutritionist or dietitian who specialises in intuitive eating might be helpful,” explains Laura. “They can help you navigate the ‘bumpy’ parts of intuitive eating – like overcoming food fears and teaching you food neutrality, or with those sticky body image bits that can hinder the rest of the intuitive eating process.”

Navigating the bumpy parts of intuitive eating can feel like swimming against the tide. Enter the third and fourth principles of intuitive eating that teach you to make peace with food and to challenge the food police, both of which can take a while. When you've spent a lifetime avoiding carbs, fat or sugar, giving yourself permission to eat whatever you want feels truly frightening! ‘What if I just eat ►



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

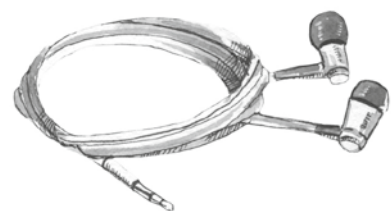
Four podcasts that explore intuitive eating, body positivity and the truth behind diet culture.

1 DON'T SALT MY GAME
Trawl the archives of Laura Thomas PhD's podcast for three seasons of interviews with game-changers from the worlds of wellness, blogging, nutrition, body positivity and 'anyone else who is shaking up the wellness world'. Caution: Laura isn't afraid to call out unscientific trends, dropping liberal f-bombs along the way.

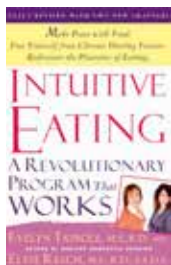
2 LOVE, FOOD
US dietitian Julie Duffy Dillon's podcast offers more than 100 episodes of Love, Food – a letter chronicling all aspects of our complicated relationships with food. As the name suggests, Julie has a secret to share with listeners: that food is not your enemy and your body is tired of the constant attacks.

3 FOOD PSYCH
Sharing her own journey from disordered eater and dieter to food writer and anti-diet dietitian, Christy Harrison wants to help people make peace with food. Her guests call out diet culture for the life thief that it is, challenging the restrictive behaviours that often masquerade as wellness and fitness.

4 APPEARANCE MATTERS
The Centre for Appearance Research is a world-leading research centre investigating body image and appearance psychology research, much of which finds its way into their podcast. Appearance Matters is hosted by Nadia Craddock and Jade Parnell who tackle subjects from cosmetic surgery to body image in schools.



INTUITIVE EATING ESSENTIAL READING



1 THE ORIGINAL: INTUITIVE EATING BY EVELYN TRIBOLE AND ELYSE RESCH

First published in 1995, this radical book hit the scene when Kate Moss and size zero were at their prime. Tribole and Resch are dietitians who deduced that diets don't work, so they developed a new approach. Intuitive eating is a weight-neutral model with a validated assessment scale and more than 90 studies to date. intuitiveeating.org.



2 THE UPDATE: JUST EAT IT BY LAURA THOMAS PHD (PUBLISHED JANUARY 2019)

Laura Thomas PhD combines her academic background in nutritional science with clinical experience working alongside intuitive eating clients in this practical book. Her fresh writing style belies her evidence-based approach; this incredibly accessible and fun book is actually packed with scientific research and an easy-to-follow plan for ultimate food freedom. laurathomasphd.co.uk.





doughnuts all day?', you may be thinking. The first few months of this new way of eating can feel chaotic, but hold your nerve. After the initial rush of freedom, most people find an equilibrium and you may notice the foods you may once have been scared to have in the house have lost their power.

Which leads us onto the sticky issue of weight and whether stopping dieting leads to weight gain. Yes, you might've rejected diet culture intellectually, but it's quite a different matter if you feel your jeans getting tighter. Self-compassion is a big part of intuitive eating, so the chances are you won't give yourself as much of a hard time if you do put on weight. And, although you may weigh more, weigh it up – 5 per cent heavier but 50 per cent happier is an equation worth cracking.

Emotional eating is also tackled, so expect to do some work around coping with your emotions without using food. Ouch. But it's not as impossible as it sounds. And because you're actually eating enough food when you're hungry, you'll likely find that your emotions even out. There's nothing like a day spent hangry at work to send you headfirst into an evening of chips and ice cream... But what if you honour that hunger from the outset, eat and have a better day because you're not ravenous and irritable? "Satisfaction is the goal," says Elyse. "It will inform all of the intuitive eating principles."



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Satisfaction sounds like a worthy motivation indeed. "It's time to heal your relationship with food and make eating one of the greatest pleasures in your life," says Elyse. Think back to that banquet table and the joy and abundance it signifies. What do you really want to eat? What will give you pleasure? When you move away from external validation and towards your own internal cues, you may find that you're naturally eating more seasonally. Sure, some people may love a crisp salad on a cold and dark December night, but our bodies are actually very good at signalling cravings that suit the season. So if you want a massive pie and mash in winter, honour that feeling. This is about bringing your hunger cues back to your own body, regardless of what the January diet brigade might be trying to peddle you.

The annual 'New Year, new you' messaging is big business for diet companies. Their profits are directly linked to how bad we feel about ourselves, which is why January is their prime money-making season. Slimming clubs ramp up their advertising at this time of year, hoping to cash in on our post-Christmas guilt, while gyms encourage us to sign up for memberships that are notoriously tricky to escape from. ►

Intuitive eating
helps us reconnect
with our hunger in
a positive way.



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As is diet culture. We've spent our whole lives at the mercy of a perniciously fatphobic culture in which thin and beautiful is portrayed as the ultimate achievement, often to the extent that we don't even notice diet culture anymore. Internalisation of these messages will take a while to reverse. But things are changing. The industry itself recognises this, hence Weight Watchers rebranding as WW – 'Wellness that Works'. But the final frontier of feminism is the body, as a wise woman once said. Focusing on who we are and what we do with our lives is a much more worthwhile (and radical) pursuit than endless introspection around what we look like. Losing the distraction of thinness frees up so much time and energy to put into changing the world. Need inspiration? The body positivity movement is fast gaining ground, particularly on social media where accounts such as Megan Crabbe of @bodyposipanda regularly post images of different body types. Scrolling through her feed is both liberating and frustrating, with many commenters leaving fatphobic messages. Thin = healthy is rhetoric that runs deep in our society, and it can feel exhausting to constantly counter.

But isn't it really unhealthy to be overweight? Well, no. Katherine Flegal conducted a study published in the *Journal of the American Medical*

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Association in 2013 in which she analysed 97 studies of mortality rates and BMI (body mass index) including data from almost 3 million people. The results were surprising. Death rates were highest among people whose BMIs categorise them as either severely underweight or severely obese, while death rates were statistically lowest among those who fall within the 'overweight' BMI category. Those who were 'mildly obese' or 'normal' were equally ranked, falling in between the highest and lowest death rates. But you'd be forgiven for not knowing this, given the fatphobic messaging around obesity and health hitting the headlines so frequently at the moment.

Intuitive eating provides the answers to so many of the current questions we have around food and our bodies, but it's a lot to digest. Take your time. Savour each principle as if part of a tasting menu, one slow course at a time. And be sure to order a pudding if you fancy it.

