

# WHAT IS WRONG WITH INTUITIVE EATING?



WHAT THE SCIENCE SAYS ABOUT  
HUNGER AND FULLNESS

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# WHAT IS WRONG WITH INTUITIVE EATING?

## INTRODUCTION

Have you come across the advice to eat when hungry, stop when full and eat whatever you want? Known as 'Intuitive Eating', these ideas are widespread, having been promoted by many people for a good number of years. Do an online search for the term, and you'll see it's all over the place; books have been written about it and businesses based on it.

At first glance it can seem a great idea. Instead of overeating, why not tune in to your natural nutritional needs and let your body tell you what, when and how much to eat? This may work for a few, and perhaps for more it works to some degree. But there are a great many people who've tried this, find it falls short and they blame themselves. So let's take a closer look, because I can explain why these things don't really work that way.

As just one example, the assumption behind the advice to wait for hunger is that it's a reliable sign of depleted energy, glucose, calories or nutrients; feeling hungry means you are in need of food. But it's a bit more complicated than that.

Consider first that when someone does quite a long fast, their hunger doesn't become increasingly more intense as time goes on and nutrient stores dwindle. As anyone with anorexia (the term means loss of appetite) will tell you, hunger fades away completely after a day or two without food. If hunger accurately reflected nutritional status, this wouldn't happen – ever, for anybody.

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### “EAT ONLY WHEN HUNGRY”

To make the same point in a different way, if hunger expresses genuine nutritional need, it would begin to subside after the first few mouthfuls of a meal. But this doesn't necessarily happen either, and many people find the opposite happens, at least sometimes. It's possible to begin a meal not feeling especially hungry, and then, after a few bites of tasty food, a sense of hunger appears. It doesn't make sense that the body would signal depletion *after* those bites but not *before*.<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, we've thought of those first few bites as a way to stimulate hunger, to awaken it. The whole point of the 'starter' course is supposed to be to awaken our appetite and 'to get our gastric juices flowing'. Americans call that first course 'the appetizer' for this reason. Why rely on hunger signals if they might need to be stimulated in the first place?

Rather than a signal of nutritional need, hunger is, at least to a large extent, a response to cues. The cue prompts an expectation of eating, simply because you ate in this kind of situation in the past, and it's this expectation that can set off all those hungry sensations in our stomach.

The cue could be the time of day: it's time for lunch! Or the cue could be the arrival of food, along with its sights and smells. *There isn't necessarily any problem at all in responding to this by eating.*

The problems arise for those who have overeaten so much that the cues triggering feelings of hunger happen much too frequently. It's okay for the expectation of eating to produce a sensation of hunger – unless you expect to eat every 10 minutes! As you might know, advice to eat when hungry isn't helpful if you feel hungry most of the time.

On the other hand, there are those who might not feel hungry, even when it would be a very good idea for them to eat. I've heard about this from a number of clients who describe such experiences when they'd previously tried Intuitive Eating. They become quite excited by the prospect of looking out for hunger signals before eating. They go past breakfast time and don't feel hungry. They don't feel hungry at lunchtime, so they don't eat anything then either. Then, by mid-

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afternoon, they feel weak, faint, irritable and shaky. They can't concentrate on their work and there's nothing available except crisps, chocolate and sweets.

A number of different factors could be contributing to an absence of hunger such as this:

- One could be stress, which can have the effect of blocking hunger signals. When an animal is genuinely stressed, perhaps because they are about to be attacked by a predator, the last thing they'll want to do is eat. Part of the automatic stress response is to direct blood to the limbs in order to fight or take flight. The digestive system shuts down until it's needed again when the animal is safe and the stress has subsided. Our present day human stress, though, is often a more chronic state. Stress builds throughout the day and many people, not feeling hungry, go for many hours without eating. Typically they eat when they get home and then, perhaps, overeat throughout the evening.
- Another factor is that eating starchy carbohydrates – especially sugar and wheat – impair proper functioning of our appetite hormones, resulting in *increased* hunger. So, if no starchy carbohydrates are eaten hunger may not appear when it otherwise would. <sup>2</sup>
- As hunger can be triggered by cues, it's best understood as an expectation of eating. When someone begins a new kind of protocol (dieting technique), especially if they are excited by its novelty, *initially* they have no expectation of 'straying off the path' – and therefore no excess hunger.

Research has shown how responsive our appetites are to placebo. In other words, our physical responses – including the release of appetite hormones ghrelin and leptin – are strongly affected by our mindset. We feel hungry or full depending on what we expect to feel. <sup>3,4</sup>

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### “STOP WHEN FULL”

Are you one of those people who do most – if not all – of your overeating at meals, even just the evening meal? Perhaps you consistently order or prepare and serve what you know is too much, but find it challenging to contemplate cutting back. Or maybe your meals aren't huge to start with, but you find it tough to stop. So you take second helpings, finish off what others have left, pick on things in the kitchen while you're clearing up and then find more things to snack on through the evening. So your meal itself isn't so large, but there seems to be no end to it.

The principle of Intuitive Eating that tells you 'to stop eating when you're full' attempts to address this problem. Once again, this advice assumes a reliable, innate wisdom in our bodies that will give us accurate feedback. Those who promote Intuitive Eating argue that it's your ignorance of this wisdom that makes you overeat. If you simply pay attention to it, your body will let you know when you've had enough.

However, many of those who overeat already think they stop eating when they're full. Isn't that what you do, at least sometimes? Don't you think that if you tried to eat less at meals you wouldn't feel full – *and that is precisely the problem?* Advising you to stop when full doesn't lead you towards any process of change; how someone who only feels full by overeating could learn how to eat less.

And how full is full anyway? Surely fullness is vague and entirely subjective; a personal evaluation, unique to each individual. Whatever it is that one person interprets as fullness could feel like just getting started to another.

Research has shown that how full people report feeling before eating doesn't have very much relationship to how much they actually consume.<sup>5</sup>

There's also a fair amount of research confirming that feelings of fullness are delayed by around 20 minutes after finishing a meal.<sup>6</sup>

The notion of 'being full' seems to make sense because we know that when we fill a cup, for example, there's a point at which it will not accept any more filling. It becomes undeniably full and will begin to spill over. Even something elastic, such

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as a balloon, at some point gets so full that it bursts. But our stomachs don't work that way – which could be a good thing or a bad thing!

The crucial difference is that *our stomachs are intimately connected to our brains*, so it's not just a matter of a mechanical filling of a certain volume, as with the cup or balloon. Our brains expect to eat from time to time – with or without genuine nutritional need. This expectation releases insulin, ghrelin, digestive enzymes and stomach acid in preparation for food intake – and all of this makes us feel hungry, and hungry for more<sup>2, 3, 4</sup>

This can be in full swing even at the end of our meals, and certainly can override any sign of fullness. Which is why it's not at all unusual to feel even hungrier at the end of a meal than when we started. This is where a great deal of overeating takes place.

It could be that what we perceive as fullness is *way beyond* the appropriate stopping point. In fact, this can be more of an aversive state: *“good grief... I couldn't possibly eat another thing!”* This state of aversion suppresses your appetite. You feel too full, but more importantly you feel *satisfied*, and that's why you stop eating.

As you probably know, our stomachs expand over time to accommodate larger amounts of food. This is why one kind of weight-loss surgery reduces the size of the stomach so that larger amounts of food cannot easily fit into it.

Your stomach is supposed to be about the size of your fist, but for many people it's become larger from years of overconsumption. To correct this and to overcome overeating, your goal would be to decrease the size of your stomach, preferably without the use of surgery. Surely, if you consistently eat until you feel full, you would not be working towards that goal. The solution is not to feel full at the end of your meals.

This, however, presents a difficulty few people talk about, especially of course those who advise Intuitive Eating. How can you finish your meals when you don't feel full – and continue to do that for long enough to make any real

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difference? To a great many people this seems impossible and unrealistic, which is why it's so often ignored as a viable solution.

This is what's different about the work I'm doing. It addresses this very question and leads you towards a workable resolution of this difficulty. This is what I refer to as 'managing your addictive appetite', one aspect of which is the experience of not being full at the end of meals.

The truth is that hunger and fullness are very difficult to define, strongly influenced by mental states and often only recognised at their extremes. When you give up believing that it's a good idea to rely on your body's signals, then you can see there's an entirely different solution, and one that is both powerful and empowering.

### **"EAT WHATEVER YOU FANCY"**

The idea here is that your body's innate wisdom will let you know what kind of food it needs. Advocates of Intuitive Eating point to animals in the wild that seem to know exactly what they need to eat, and advise you to do the same. It's odd, though, to think of us as living 'in the wild', when it's more like we're living in the cultural equivalent of Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory!

It's possible you could be in touch with that natural wisdom *if* you only ate food you'd find 'in the wild'. I'm not encouraging you to do that necessarily. I'm saying that whenever we encounter modern foods – and it's surely inevitable we will – we would do well to recognise their effects: our exaggerated desire for them and our difficulty in controlling their consumption.<sup>7</sup>

The sense of desire is going to feel different to each person, and even for each person from occasion to occasion. It's feeling attracted towards something, certainly, and most likely thinking you would enjoy eating it, that you fancy it.

This attraction could be barely conscious, but when we are aware of it, we often call it a craving, and it can be mistaken for genuine hunger or need. (I suggest that attraction, desire, urge and craving are the same thing with varying degrees of intensity, just as irritation is a less intense form of rage.)

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I have heard people say they crave greens sometimes, but what most people crave most of the time is, of course, food that contains various combinations of starchy carbohydrates, such as sugar and grains, together with fats.

One study looked at the eating habits and self-reported food cravings in a group of overweight women over a period of six months. I don't think it will surprise you to hear that the foods that were craved were more than twice as high in energy density (calories per gram) as other foods in their diet. It's been well established that the starchy-carbohydrate-and-fat combinations have greater reinforcing properties, biochemically speaking.<sup>8</sup>

All food contains *some* reinforcing properties, but a natural food, such as broccoli, has those reinforcing properties in a natural balance. When a food product is manufactured it has a far greater proportion of these highly reinforcing elements, which makes it so much more attractive, desirable and potentially addictive.

I cannot emphasise enough that *this is always a matter of degree*. It's very important to enjoy what you eat – but for many who overeat, they get too much enjoyment, and this comes at a cost.

Could it be that you satisfy an appropriate need for and delight in food, and on top of that you satisfy an excessive, addictive appetite? If so, it's because you've trained yourself to expect more of those more addictive elements more often. So perhaps you eat more starchy carbs than you really need at meals, perhaps quite literally mixed up on the plate with the food you do need. Then sugar for dessert after the meal. And maybe some more carbs for snacks later on that evening?

If you've developed habits such as these and repeated them daily for years, then, whenever you stop to listen to what your body needs, guess what? It tells you it needs sugary, starchy carbs!

One study in particular sums it all up for me. The pharmacological elements of chocolate were put into capsules and given to self-confessed 'chocolate cravers'



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to see if the capsules would satisfy their cravings. They didn't. At all. As you might expect.<sup>9</sup>

I could go along with this idea of tuning into my genuine needs if I lived in an environment where I had only ever encountered purely natural foods, and where manufactured carbohydrates were very occasionally on offer, if ever.

But why would a reliable, natural system exist when, in terms of human history, it's only relatively recently that we've had such abundance, such an enormous variety of food year round, and especially so much processed food? It makes no sense to me that my body has any intuition that can manage my response to modern food.

### THE WAY FORWARD

It can help us to take into consideration the food scarcity that was so common, even just a few generations ago:

*"...there is no clear adaptive advantage for an organism to consume just enough food to maintain energy balance. Such a system would fail to protect against future gaps in food availability. A strong hunger drive would act to encourage overconsumption and promote energy storage for use during intermittent food shortages."*<sup>6</sup>

In other words, we have bodies that were built to eat... and eat... and eat at every available opportunity.

It's absolutely fine if you are hungry when you eat, so by all means make your best guesses about that. You certainly can develop a fairly good idea of what, how much and how often to eat, put together by your understanding of your nutritional needs, your own schedule and the availability of nutritious food throughout your day. But I suggest that the way that's done is through your own process of trial-and-error.

Your body can teach you what, when and how much to eat, but in a completely different way: this is *after* eating, rather than *before*. When you pay attention to the different effects eating various foods have on your body – in terms

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of energy, sleep, digestion, joint aches, headaches, moods, to name a few – you tune in to the most powerful and effective motivation there is to eat less, and especially to eat less of certain things. What you do is to recall that feedback, based on your own experience, the next time you are faced with similar options.

As an example, you might remember that the last time you ate particular items you felt a bit nauseous. This certainly isn't the only concept that could deliver control, but it will be considerably more helpful than weight loss alone, for a number of reasons.

There are other simple strategies you can use that will make things easier, such as adjusting the proportions of macronutrients – more good quality proteins and fats with less starchy carbohydrate – which will leave you feeling more full with less food at the end of meals and less hungry between meals.<sup>10</sup>

And your desire to eat sugary and starchy carbs is likely to be stronger whenever you are genuinely in need of food. Which means you can make things a lot easier for yourself by eating real, nutritious food throughout the day.<sup>11</sup>

For most people, however, there is something that gets in the way, and this is their addictive (excess) appetite or desire. So, for example, if you feel hungry for toast and jam while utterly disinterested in chunks of carrot and cucumber, what you're experiencing is addictive hunger.<sup>12</sup>

This can certainly feel like hunger, so it's very easy to assume you've got an entirely appropriate need of food. Not only that, but it could be you really do have a genuine need of food at that time! However, the toast and jam never can provide the nutrient content of the vegetables, although your body – *and even most of your brain* – won't be able to tell you that. Your ability to clearly choose between the two types of food on offer is a thinking process rather than instinctive.

You make real progress through reevaluating your relationship with those foods, which are, of course, very likely to be the food you love the most: starchy carbohydrates such as sugar and wheat. It's crucial to do this *imperfectly*, rather than through complete abstinence, which is unrealistic in the long term.

With this, there are three important issues to consider:

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- **Choice:** The idea that certain foods or certain quantities should be forbidden is the cornerstone of an upset relationship with food, creating feelings of deprivation and obsession, which then lead to rebellious overeating. The solution is in developing a deep sense of freedom of choice, along with learning how to make the choices you really do want to live with.
- **Motivation:** Whenever you choose to eat something or not, you also choose an outcome, depending on the choice you made. Most people think of that outcome in terms of the weight, size and shape of their body, but if this is all you consider, you can easily ignore far more effective reasons to eat less. More energy, better sleep or feeling in control are examples of motivation that provides far more powerful feedback because it's direct and more immediate.
- **Desire:** Our brains regard manufactured, processed foods as highly rewarding, which is why we have an innate tendency to prioritise them, to prefer them and to seek them out. When you can become more aware of these automatic reactions, you gain the possibility of control over them.

If you've read my book *Eating Less* you already know about the techniques I describe, in particular, Times, Plans and The Outline. Their purpose is to help you to integrate these three themes. In doing so, you strengthen neural pathways in the front of your brain (prefrontal cortex). There are many significant benefits to this – not least of which is feeling less hungry and more satisfied! <sup>13</sup>

The end result is enjoyment of food that, in general, contains far less of those starchy carbs. In time, the less you eat of these things, the less you feel like you need or even want them. As that happens, the more you will enjoy the food that doesn't have so much of those addictive elements.

The essential skill to develop is not reading hunger and fullness signals, but managing and resolving the addictive appetite you have for all that food you don't need. But don't trust your body to tell you what's addictive overeating and what isn't. It isn't very good at knowing the difference.

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### NOTES

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Books by Gillian Riley:

*Eating Less: Say goodbye to overeating*  
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(Full Stop, 2013)

*How To Stop Smoking And Stay Stopped For Good*  
(Random House/Vermilion, 2007)

*Willpower*  
(Random House/Vermilion, 2003)