



WEIGHT LOSS / EATING HABITS

Navigating Holiday Eating

Kim Peirano, DACM, LAc | DIGITAL EXCLUSIVE

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- Mindful eating techniques help us reconnect with our bodies and minds, often shedding light on our behaviors and thoughts related to food in the process.
- By allowing ourselves to enjoy a wide variety of foods, we can loosen the grip of disordered eating and reduce the urge to binge.
- Restricting yourself from the foods you love during the holidays because you fear it will “undo your progress” can set you up for overindulging or experiencing regret later on.

Editor's Note: This article appeared originally in *Acupuncture Today*, sister publication of Dynamic Chiropractic. The topic is relevant for all health care providers to educate and guide their patients toward better health this holiday season - and all year round.

Every time the holiday season approaches, I invariably encounter questions about how to maintain a healthy lifestyle or receive requests for advice on preventing weight gain during this festive period. As a practitioner who adheres to the principles of Health at Every Size (HAES), I view these inquiries as a doorway to a broader concern - a pervasive cultural issue surrounding fat stigmatization and an excessive focus on weight loss and so-called “healthy” eating at any cost.

Here are the top strategies and practices I teach my patients to help them lean into intuitive eating and away from diet culture, especially during the holidays.

Hunger-Fullness Cues

When we embark on diets, we inadvertently convey to ourselves that we must disregard our own inner voices. Over time, this can lead to codependent patterns and people-pleasing behavior, especially when dieting is instilled during childhood or persists over an extended period. Learning

how to tune into your body's signals and, subsequently, honoring that information, can be profoundly healing.

The steps involved are quite simple. I prefer to use a scale from 1 to 10 to describe hunger and fullness sensations:

1. Absolutely starving with physical hunger symptoms
2. Starving
3. Hungry
4. Need to eat soon
5. Could eat soon
6. Satisfied with a little room for more
7. Satisfied and content
8. Full
9. Overate
10. Painfully full

Our goal is to maintain a range between 4 and 7, whereby we eat when we're comfortably hungry, but not excessively so. A straightforward practice involves checking in throughout the day, even when it's not mealtime or when you feel hungry. This helps us become more attuned to what these sensations mean and where they fall on the scale.

Mindful Eating

One issue that arises when we engage in mindless eating or fail to be fully present with our food is that we tend to disconnect from our bodies. In doing so, we lose touch with our hunger and fullness cues, essentially "missing the meal." Consequently, we don't experience the same level of joy and satisfaction because we barely noticed the meal in the first place.

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Embracing mindful eating can be a challenging endeavor. Many patients face various obstacles when I recommend this practice to them. The primary objective is to consume at least one meal a day with complete attention and focus. That means no reading, watching TV, surfing the internet, listening to music, getting caught up in work, or even engaging in conversation. Just be fully present with your meal and observe what you experience.

Creating Balance

When I talk about balance, I mean incorporating all macronutrient groups and fiber into every meal. This approach can be particularly useful when dealing with issues like binge eating or when reintroducing foods that were once deemed "off-limits." By allowing ourselves to enjoy a wide variety of foods, we can loosen the grip of disordered eating and reduce the urge to binge, as we're no longer restricting ourselves.

It's a straightforward strategy: When you're craving a particular food, it's important to give yourself permission to enjoy it. To achieve more balance, ensure that the food or combination of foods you consume includes a bit of everything from the list below:

- Carbohydrates: These provide energy.
- Fats: They offer stable energy.
- Protein: This helps you feel satisfied.
- Fiber: It contributes to a feeling of fullness.

- Foods you crave: These contribute to your overall happiness.

When we approach our diet in this manner, we tend to feel both physically and mentally satisfied. We also benefit from the additional nutrients we gain from this balanced approach to our meals.

Boundary Setting & Communication

Heading to family dinners can be quite stressful for some individuals, especially when dealing with “food pusher”- or “judger”-type family members. These situations can be challenging, and it’s often tricky to weigh the pros and cons: Should you just skip these gatherings? How can you assert yourself without reacting defensively? Developing this skill takes time and practice, but every small step matters.

I believe the most crucial thing to keep in mind at these events is that you’re entitled to say “no” without offering an explanation.

Setting boundaries revolves around your own behavior and the limits you establish for how people interact with you. It’s not about controlling what other people do or don’t do. Before attending such events, you can create a personal game plan. Your plan can be as complex and tailored as you prefer, but having a strategy in place beforehand can bolster your resolve, enabling you to stay true to yourself during times when you might feel significant pressure to conform to your family’s desires or comments.

Finally, when things inevitably deviate from your plans, practicing self-forgiveness is a pivotal component for ongoing progress. It’s OK if it wasn’t perfect or if you succumbed to Grandma’s peer pressure. Remember that it’s just one day among many, and a single day doesn’t make or break your journey toward health and healing.

A Note on Alcohol

How should an intuitive eater approach alcohol? The key is to tune in to your goals, expectations, and the aftermath of consuming it, and carefully consider your choices based on what you’re seeking and the experiences you want. This principle can also be relevant for individuals with food sensitivities who still have a fondness for foods that may make them feel unwell later.

When deciding whether to drink at an event, it can be beneficial to ask yourself this question: *Will drinking enhance or improve my evening, and to what extent?*

If the answer is no, it becomes evident that drinking may not enhance your evening, and it certainly won’t promote your health. However, if the answer is yes, then you can explore how much alcohol is the right amount.

Is it one drink, or perhaps five? Does becoming heavily intoxicated or merely tipsy genuinely enhance the evening, or are you using it as a way to avoid something or soothe your nerves? Consider how you’ll feel afterward – both physically and mentally. Does that feeling align with your overall health and life goals?

Intuitive Eating Allows You to Enjoy

One aspect of holiday eating that often goes underestimated is how simply enjoyable it can be. Let’s be honest, it’s a unique time when we receive a bundle of 30 different types of cookies in the mail, and it’s genuinely fun to savor each one, even if it might lead to an occasional stomachache. Restricting yourself from the foods you love during the holidays because you fear it will “undo your

progress” can set you up for overindulging or experiencing regret later on.

It’s essential to remember that one day of indulgence won’t undo your progress or jeopardize your health, just as one day of healthy eating or exercise won’t magically bestow health or fitness upon you.

So, embrace the holiday season, have a bit of fun, and enjoy those delightful foods if you so desire. Remember, it’s all part of the celebration!

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