

Creating a healthier relationship with food

A healthy relationship with food fuels our physical, emotional and mental wellbeing. Take a moment to think about your relationship with food. Is it a good one?

Not sure? Here's a quick check. Below, choose which statement in each row sounds most like you:

| Column A | Column B |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I usually eat when I'm hungry | <input type="checkbox"/> I tend to eat when I'm not hungry or I don't let myself eat even if I am hungry |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I usually stop eating when I'm full | <input type="checkbox"/> I tend to eat past the feeling of being full or not eat enough to feel full |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel good about myself when I eat | <input type="checkbox"/> I often criticise myself for eating or what I'm eating |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I eat what I enjoy and enjoy what I eat | <input type="checkbox"/> I restrict what I eat or feel out of control when I eat |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I usually eat a variety of nutritious foods and enjoy trying new foods | <input type="checkbox"/> I only eat certain foods and generally prefer not to try new foods |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel comfortable eating with others or by myself | <input type="checkbox"/> I prefer to eat alone or in secret, and tend to avoid eating with others |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I tend to eat foods that are high in calories and low in nutrients in moderation | <input type="checkbox"/> I think of foods that are high in calories and low in nutrients as 'bad', and feel badly about myself if I eat them |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I might eat too much on special occasions, but I'm OK with that | <input type="checkbox"/> I feel guilt, shame or embarrassment when I eat or after I eat |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I find ways to make myself feel better when I'm sad, angry, stressed, bored or lonely that do not involve eating or drinking | <input type="checkbox"/> I eat and/or drink to comfort or calm myself when I'm sad, angry, stressed, bored or lonely |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I generally feel good about myself and how I look | <input type="checkbox"/> I worry a lot about my weight and how I look, and often try to diet |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I typically eat nutritious foods, exercise my body and get enough sleep | <input type="checkbox"/> I experience fatigue, dizziness, digestive issues, and/or other physical ailments |

What a healthy relationship looks like

All of the statements in Column A are signs of a healthy relationship with food. For people giving these answers, eating enriches their body and mental health. They also have a balanced approach to food. They are comfortable knowing that sometimes they may eat too much or too little, but usually eat according to their hunger, appetite and nutritional needs.

But, if you're like many people, chances are at least a few of the statements in Column B felt familiar. And, as you probably already surmised, all of the statements in Column B are signs your relationship with food could be improved.

Assessing your relationship

To get a better understanding of your relationship with food, consider journalling for a week or two to reveal potential patterns. Each time you eat or feel hungry, jot down:

- Where you were and what you were doing
- How you were feeling in the moment and why
- What you ate or why you didn't eat
- How you felt afterwards

Only use this exercise as an objective way to review your relationship with food. Once you know your triggers, it tends to be easier to change your behaviour. For example, if you find:

- **You tend to eat to soothe your emotions.** Think about other things you can do (such as going for a walk, texting a friend, taking a few deep breaths, etc.) the next time you're overcome with emotion. Also, consider finding ways to reduce your stress in the moment and the long term.
- **You're so busy you end up skipping meals** throughout the day, but you usually feel tired and irritable. Consider preparing or buying nutritious meals and snacks in advance so you have them on hand.
- **When you're not hungry, you eat mindlessly out of boredom or habit** when doing a passive activity, like watching TV. Next time you're looking for something to do, skip the food in favour of another activity you enjoy. And, if you do want a snack while you're watching TV, avoid bringing the bag of crisps or ice cream tub with you. Instead, serve yourself a portion and don't get a refill.
- **You feel pressured to eat or not eat a certain way** in specific situations. The next time you're in that friend group or family gathering, do your best to focus on and honour your own needs. Maybe it means eating before you arrive, politely saying no thank you, or splitting a meal. It might also mean limiting the time you spend in those situations.

Those are just a few examples. Many people, including children and adolescents, have some tension(s) in their relationship with food. And, assuming they have access to enough food, it usually involves restricting or binge-eating, such as:

- Relying on food to soothe or comfort you during difficult times, like when you are upset, stressed, sad or lonely.
- Putting yourself on yo-yo and/or fad diets or exercise regimes. These are often used as ‘quick fixes’ for losing weight, gaining muscle mass or somehow transforming your physique.
- Creating a reward/punishment system that ties your physical activity or actions with what you can or cannot eat.
- Dividing foods into ‘good’ or ‘bad’, and shaming yourself or feeling badly if you eat a ‘bad’ food.
- Eating only certain foods and being unwilling to try new things.

All of these behaviours can be loosely described as ‘disordered eating’. And they also can be signs of eating disorders.

Tips for caregivers

Parents and caregivers often worry about whether their children are getting enough food and nutrients, especially if they seem to be particularly choosy about what they will or won’t eat.

First, consider your child’s developmental stage. For example, it’s natural for toddlers to be particularly picky, but they tend to grow out of it as they mature. And research has shown that picky eating at this stage doesn’t usually have any long-term health impacts.¹ If the child is growing and maturing, the chances are that they will be OK.

Similarly, a pre-teen or adolescent may be trying to assert their independence as a natural part of growing up. They also may be responding to the changes their body is going through as it develops.

Also, consider what may be influencing their decision-making:

- Could they feel pressured by you or someone else to eat or not eat certain foods?
- Maybe your child is a slow eater and feels pressured to finish faster?
- Are they actually hungry when you sit down to eat? Consider stopping them snacking before meal times or giving them the meal as a part of their snacks.
- Are they getting food rewards for good behaviour? If so, your child may begin to associate the treats as goodness and other foods as badness.
- Do you have regular meal times? And are they typically enjoyable or stressful? If not, consider creating a routine and/or ways to make the meal time something to look forward to and enjoy.
- Do they have a heightened sense of smell or not like certain textures or flavours? If so, consider giving these foods in smaller amounts or other forms, or offering them other foods with similar nutrients.
- Are they afraid of something, like choking or trying new things?

In any case, a simple guideline to follow is if the child or adolescent is active and growing, then they’re probably getting enough nutritious foods to eat.²

If not, then there might be an underlying medical or mental health concern, such as an eating disorder. Consult a mental health or medical professional.

Eating disorders

Eating disorders affect an estimated 8% of women and 2% of men globally, and potentially more since they are often undiagnosed or misdiagnosed.³ And an estimated 1 in 20 people with eating disorders die as a result of complications or by suicide.⁴

While eating disorders often develop in adolescence and young adulthood, eating disorders can occur at any age, including in very young children. Warning signs include:

- Dieting or following strict rules about food and exercise
- Stunted growth and development
- Disordered eating habits, such as eating a lot of food very fast, cutting food into small pieces and eating very slowly, lying about how much you've eaten, or avoiding eating with others
- Performance decline at work/school, or when taking part in sports or other activities
- Problems in relationships and social life
- Mental health disorders or symptoms, including depression, anxiety, suicide ideation, low self-esteem and perfectionism
- Associated medical conditions and/or health complications, such as heart problems, bone loss, diabetes, hypertension, chronic fatigue, gastrointestinal issues, among other things
- Alcohol and substance abuse disorders

And, like mental illnesses in general, eating disorders do not discriminate. People with eating disorders come from all backgrounds. They also come in all shapes and sizes. A person living with an eating disorder may gain weight, lose weight, or remain physically as they looked before the disorder developed. Some people have more than one eating disorder, either at the same time or while transitioning from one to another.

Common eating disorders include:

- **Anorexia nervosa**, in which a person intensely fears weight gain and tries to control their weight by severely limiting food intake, overexercising or both.
- **Binge eating disorder**, in which a person overeats excessively and feels out of control. They usually do so secretly, and feel ashamed and embarrassed about it.
- **Bulimia nervosa**, in which a person binge eats, then severely limits what they eat and/or takes drastic measures (such as vomiting, using laxatives or excessive exercise) to avoid gaining weight.
- **Avoidant restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID)**, in which a person 1.) has no interest in eating, 2.) avoids foods based on texture, appearance, colour or smell, and/or 3.) is worried about what might happen if they eat, such as choking, vomiting or constipation.

Recovery from an eating disorder is challenging and can take weeks, months or, in some cases, years. But it is possible, and many people achieve it, especially with early intervention. You can use this brief [screening tool](#) to see if you or someone in your care might be struggling with an eating disorder. Also, consider seeking professional help.

¹ University of Bristol. **Should we worry about picky eating?** Accessed 27 November 2023.

² NHS. **Fussy eaters.** Accessed 27 November 2023.

³ The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition. **Prevalence of eating disorders over the 2000–2018 period: a systematic literature review.** Accessed 28 November 2023.

⁴ National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA). **Eating disorder myths.** Accessed 28 November 2023.

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WF12253179 142516-122023