

M I N D



F U L L

TUNE OUT DIET CULTURE
TUNE IN TO YOUR BODY

BY ELLIE ERLICH

I will never forget the day my relationship with food was forever changed.

Perhaps you can pinpoint that moment when your dad's famous pancakes became the enemy and not a reason to jump out of bed on a Sunday morning, or when the cookie your mom slipped into your lunch tormented you all the way through ninth period. For me, it was sophomore year of high school a few days before Brandon Silverstein's infamous Halloween party.

My best friend Mallory and I got a ride to the mall from her mom and we swiftly entered the American Apparel store near the entrance to search for items to complete our very clichéd, very inappropriate schoolgirl costumes.

We walked around the store, touching bits of fabric and piling the tiny spandex skirts and cropped tank tops into our arms, each with a small letter S on the label. We went into adjacent fitting rooms and began to try our future outfits.

I will never forget the pang in my stomach, the panic in my throat when the metallic pleated mini skirt did not zip all the way up my waist. A confusing ache seemed to wrap itself around me while I searched for an answer in the mirror. I turned myself to the side and pushed against this unfamiliar bit of flesh above my hips. All of the giddiness I felt before seemed to melt right off of me. I felt angry, hot, ashamed – unsure of how to answer when Mallory called out from across the dressing room.

“How does it look?”

I pulled the skirt off of me, pressing hot tears back into the corners of my eyes. The bubbles of emotions that started in my stomach began to multiply violently, traveling towards my chest and head. It was in that moment that I detached myself from my body – what I saw in the mirror wasn't on my team. That bigger-than-a-size-small waist was not my friend. In fact, it was the enemy and I had to do everything in my power to defeat it.

I told Mallory the skirt was similar to one I already had at home and promised myself I would lose the weight, come back to the mall and fit into a size small before the weekend came and the party approached.

Mallory and I waited for her mom to come pick us up at a California Pizza Kitchen near the back entrance. As she ate her barbecue chicken pizza without second thought, fervently gabbing about a chemistry assignment she wrongfully received a B in, I eyed the food on her plate and sipped a diet Coke. She left a few pieces of pizza behind and offered me a slice, wondering why I hadn't ordered anything since the last time we ate was during fourth period.

“No, I'm not hungry.”

That was the first diet I ever put myself on.

INTRODUCTION

I'm not sure I ever stopped dieting after that day. For years my body was a stranger I battled against, trying to silence the noise of its belly grumbles with detoxes and trick it into fullness with fad diet after fad diet. I've been vegan, paleo, gluten-free, dairy-free, sugar-free and everything in between. I've followed the advice of photo-shopped celebrities in Self Magazine and spent hundreds of dollars on juice that promised to get me into bikini shape by Friday.

Today's constant fixation on image, the inundation of picture perfect lifestyles and bodies and eating on Instagram, in advertisements, grocery stores and even restaurant menus, drove me to crazy weight fluctuations. I restricted to get to a lower body weight, and then binged on the list of "bad" food for that diet cycle the second I allowed myself to indulge. I didn't know how to handle bread, what to do when I was offered a slice of my own birthday cake, how to celebrate Thanksgiving or how to order a salad I could actually enjoy.

It took a dozen or so hiatuses from social media, a shelf full of mindfulness books and two years of masters classes for me to finally realize something I knew so obviously before that infamous day in front of the American Apparel mirror sophomore year of high school.

The hiatuses from social media taught me that comparing our bodies and nutrient needs to digital versions of friends and stranger is like trying to fit a size seven foot into a size four shoe. It's uncomfortable, illogical and repeating to do so causes a numbing sensation that only causes further detachment from our own physiological needs. The shelf full of mindfulness books brought me endless ways to get back into my body. I had cut off all ties with my five feet and three inches of living, breathing matter when I decided that it's mirror image was ugly and worthless.

Mindfulness has taught me ways to cut through the noise of diet culture and tune in to what I really need to feel healthy, strong and happy.

My two years of masters classes were completed at NYU where I studied Nutrition and Dietetics. The information I learned finally solidified the fact that food is just fuel. The mechanisms our bodies use to break down food for energy are linked to strong physiological cues that signal hunger and fullness. Furthermore, fruits, vegetables and whole grains are good choices to fill your plate because they provide essential nutrients, and not because they promote weight loss.

This book encompasses all three aspects for a holistic approach to intuitive eating – a practice that encourages the use of your own mind and body for all answers to a healthy diet. With a simple breakdown of hunger and fullness along with best practices for each, the goal of this reading experience is to learn to never rely on another source for healthy eating ever again. It's time to stop dieting and start becoming *mindfull*.

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hunger

a feeling of discomfort or weakness caused by lack of food, coupled with the desire to eat.

“Are you hungry?”

That’s a question I’m asked by friends when we’re making plans, from my mom when I visit New Jersey with a bag of laundry or from first dates that are going well.

Ironically, it’s rarely a question that is asked by authors of diet websites or the Instagram influencers who advocate their shiny, healthy eating lifestyles. And it’s a question I would almost never ask myself.

You'd think that with breakfast, lunch and dinner being a part of my daily life, I would ask myself this question a few times a day. Yet ever since my 15-year-old self noticed a soft bit of cushiony skin across her lower stomach in the dressing room of an American Apparel, hunger became irrelevant. From this moment on, food had little to do with hunger. It was a weapon against the parts of me I poked at in the mirror, it was anxiety-provoking and meaningless in the context of my body's physiological needs.

For years "are you hungry" was replaced in my thoughts with "how many grams of sugar does that have?" "Is it Paleo-friendly?" "Did I eat too many carbs already?" "Do my arms look fat?" "Did I go to the gym enough this week?" and "Will I be judged for eating this?"

That's a pretty exhausting conversation to have with yourself over a bit of breakfast. It took understanding what hunger really is in order for me to silence the noise in my head to simply ask myself: "am I hungry?"

Hunger is a sensation. It is not what someone else tells us to do. It is not a sign of weakness against the versions of you reflected in dressing room mirrors. It is not shameful or scary or upsetting. True hunger is driven by hormones – not emotions, time-of-day, your workday schedule or the rules and regulations of the latest diet fad.

What is hunger?

Our bodies were designed to strive for homeostasis, or a stable internal environment. This preference for a steady state fuels mechanisms that control energy balance. So, when our bodies have burned up the food in our stomachs and our blood sugar and insulin levels drop, the gut produces a hormone called ghrelin to let your brain know you're hungry. Once your brain receives that info from ghrelin, it triggers the release of neuropeptide Y which stimulates our appetites, (Conger).

Seems pretty simple, right? So when did ghrelin start taunting you like a middle school bully? When did neuropeptide Y elicit absolute panic instead of just a need to eat food?

Ignoring Primal Hunger

Research historians have found that in times of famine or extreme food shortages, food becomes an obsession resulting in certain behavioral problems, (Tribole et al). The same goes for restrictive dieting – the more we turn down certain social gatherings, traditional holiday foods or our own body’s cravings the more we instill a fear of hunger or of certain foods. Ignoring our hunger signals can cause psychological effects that create an unhealthy obsession with food, leading to binge-eating behaviors,

The inability to stick to a diet is not because of a lack of will power. There is a biological need to maintain a consistent body weight, (Tribole et al).

Take the Key's Minnesota Study for example. Subjects recruited for the study (single males in good physical health) were called to lose 25 percent of their normal body weight. The severe calorie restriction resulted in dramatic behavioral changes.

Hunger made the men obsessed with food – they would read and talk about meals and reported fatigue, irritability and depression. When the subjects were allowed to eat normally after the semi-starvation period, some engaged in extreme overeating with one participant binging to the point of hospitalization. They simply could not satisfy their cravings for food by filling up their stomachs. Many put on substantial weight and took years to fully recover from the effects of the 6-month semi-starvation period, (Kalm et al).

Thankfully, we are not subjects enrolled in Ancel Keys' study, but we often put ourselves on restrictive diet plans that elicit similar types of eating patterns and obsessions. Today more than ever, restrictive diets are mediated by the noises and images we get from our phones. Social media is riddled with diet culture messaging. Instagram can remind us of foods we have put on the "bad" list or force a comparison between our own eating patterns and patterns of influencers who claim to follow a "clean eating" lifestyle. There is no one-size-fits-all way of eating – your body has its own unique needs and patterns for energy.

A study conducted in the UK revealed that higher Instagram use was associated with greater tendency towards orthorexia nervosa, or an obsession with healthy eating. 54% of consumers use social media to discover and share food experiences, and 42% use it to seek advice about food, (Turner et al). The problem with letting digital platforms inform your eating behaviors is that it doesn't allow you to clearly hear the communication taking place between your hormones and your brain. It allows emotional and societal pressures to flood those interactions and encourage disordered eating rather than *mindfull* practices.

EXERCISES – HONORING YOUR HUNGER.

YOUR BODY NEEDS TO KNOW THAT IT WILL HAVE ACCESS TO A WIDE VARIETY OF FOOD. DIETING AND RESTRICTION HAS COME TO AN END; THE NEED TO PREPARE FOR A SELF-IMPOSED FOOD DEPRIVATION PERIOD IS NO LONGER. THIS EXERCISE IS MEANT TO HELP YOU

- 1) IDENTIFY YOUR PERSONAL HUNGER CUES,**
- 2) ALLOW YOURSELF TO FEEL THEM WITHOUT JUDGEMENT**
- 3) RESPOND TO THEM IN A HEALTHY WAY.**

WAKE UP AND FEEL:

THE MORNING IS A GREAT TIME TO FEEL YOUR BODY SIGNALING FOR FUEL. AFTER A NIGHT OF FASTING, YOUR ENERGY STORES ARE LIKELY LOW AND IN TIME GHRELIN WILL BE SENDING SOME MESSAGES TO YOUR BRAIN. BEFORE YOU REACH FOR BREAKFAST OR EVEN COFFEE (THIS CAN OFTEN MASK YOUR HUNGER), TRY TO SIT AND FEEL HUNGER AS IT WORKS ITS WAY INTO YOUR BODY. NOTICE THE PHYSICAL FEELINGS AND HOW THEY DIFFER FROM EMOTIONAL ONES. YOU MAY FEEL A HOLLOWNESS IN YOUR BELLY OR DULL PANGS. PERHAPS YOU START TO FEEL IRRITABLE OR LETHARGIC. WRITE DOWN YOUR OWN PERSONAL CUES AND USE THEM TO GUIDE YOU IN YOUR NEXT MINDFULL EATING JOURNEY.

EXERCISES – WHAT I FEEL: PHYSICAL

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EXERCISES – WHAT I FEEL: EMOTIONAL

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satiety

the quality or state of being fed or gratified to or beyond capacity : surfeit, fullness.

Whenever I babysat my two-year-old nephew I was fascinated by the way he could so easily push away the plate of macaroni and cheese after a few bites. I eyed the perfectly gooey mess of carbs and fat and wondered how on earth he could deny himself the rest of the bowl. It took every bit of willpower for me not to pick up the plastic Mickey Mouse spoon myself and finish off all of the delicious leftovers while he moved on to his Paw Patrol figurines. That macaroni and cheese represented entirely different things to us; I saw a bowl of sin and guilt – everything that diet culture had taught me to avoid at all costs. My nephew saw it as dinner. He wouldn't count the calories or grams of fat and certainly would not pinch at his body in the mirror afterwards wishing he had just had a salad.

My two-year-old nephew is a master of feeling his fullness. We were all once masters of this in our younger years when these physiological mechanisms were tightly controlled for our growth and survival.

What happens when you're full?

Leptin, a hormone released from fat cells, sends a signal to the brain to tell our bodies that we're satisfied and can stop eating. It does so by turning down the production of neuropeptide Y and cranking up levels of proopiomelanocortin in our bloodstream. This ultimately decreases our appetite. Unfortunately, this process does not happen simultaneously which is why we can often feel uncomfortably full after finishing a large meal, (Conger).

Still, problematic eating behaviors are familiar struggles for women in the US. A national community study of problematic eating behaviors found that 18% of women engaged in overeating in the past 3 months and nearly 30% felt that they had lost control over eating,(Bush et al). The goal of eating mindfully is to get to a place of comfortable satiety. When you are conditioned to eat what a diet plans tells you to eat, you often throw your feelings of fullness to the wayside. Whether you have been conditioned to clean your plate, stop before you're actually satisfied or eat when you are not hungry, the feelings of comfortable satiety can be missed if you are not eating mindfully.

In a study titled Eat For Life, researchers set out to examine if training in intuitive eating and mindfulness resulted in improvement in these areas for women in the workplace. Through subscales, questionnaires and a 10-week class on intuitive eating, participants were encouraged to bring more awareness to their reasons for eating and emotional precursors.

The participants practiced mindfulness by using the “BASICS of mindful eating” – belly check, assess your food, slow down, investigate your hunger and satiety throughout the meal, chew your food thoroughly and savor your food, (Bush et al). This practice has been adopted and altered for your own use below! The intervention was successful with women in the Eat for Life group demonstrating higher body appreciation, intuitive eating practices and mindfulness. Try practicing the BASICS the next time you sit down to eat.

Respect your body.

The day I decided to journey into mindful eating was the day I became friends with my body.

Our culture has a way of driving a wedge between our unique shapes, sizes and needs and the way we feel. We are often made to think that we should be twisting and molding ourselves to fit a certain fashion trend, celebrity influence, Instagram filter or even our friend's expectations.

You have your body for your whole life – it's time to give it more love by remembering that it deserves to be nourished, treated with respect, dressed beautifully and moved comfortably!

Besides learning to eat mindfully, it is also important to take the time to love and appreciate your body for everything it does – its strengths and goals, the ways it keeps you safe without you even noticing, the times it has overcome difficulties and how it has brought you to where you are today!

Dear body, I love the way you...

Whenever you can, unplug from the voices and images of everyone else's bodies on your screen and write down the positive messages you are receiving from your own.

A large, empty white rectangular area occupies the lower two-thirds of the page, serving as a space for the user to write their positive messages to their body. The background of the entire page is a close-up, textured image of green foam, likely from a beverage, with various shades of green and white bubbles.

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