

“HOW I STOPPED OBSESSING OVER FOOD”

Caroline Rothstein eats whatever she wants. And she doesn't feel bad about it—or hate her body. Sound impossible? It's called intuitive eating, and this is how she does it.

8:30 a.m.

It's a sunny Saturday in Manhattan. I stretch, shower, and ask my stomach what it wants. I'm meeting a friend at 10:30; another at noon. I'm not hungry—yet. I put a handful of strawberries in a bag and head out.

Before my friend arrives, hunger calls. I grab the berries and eat slowly, tasting the sweetness. Satisfied, I leave a few in the bag. It's the way I always eat, a practice called intuitive eating. When hungry, I eat what I crave—cake, salad, fries. I stop when I'm full. I give myself “unconditional permission to eat,” as it's put by Elyse Resch, RD, and Evelyn Tribole, RD, who literally wrote the book on the subject.

I didn't always know or trust my body this well. For 10 years, I struggled with an eating disorder, using food to cope with stress. When I was sexually assaulted as a teen and my brother was hit by a

car and killed, it got worse. I restricted food, binged, or purged to ease the pain.

At my therapist's suggestion, I read *When Food Is Love*, by Geneen Roth. It showed me that eating doesn't have to be tied to emotions. With my therapist's help, I learned to eat without binging or purging, to allow natural desires to guide me. When I realized food wasn't an enemy—that I could eat with joy and excitement—it blew my mind.

12:00 p.m.

I walk to brunch, craving something warm and savory. A block from the restaurant, I see a farmers' market and buy my favorite chickpea bread. I don't want it right now, but I might have it tomorrow for breakfast. I used to eat whatever was in front of me, especially if I was feeling overwhelmed. Today, I can't remember the last time I ate just because food was there.

It's not about willpower. It's about paying attention to gut feelings—literal and figurative. I've learned to recognize hunger pains and feelings of fullness. I check in with my emotions often. Still, I sometimes eat extra...like at holidays when my nana makes her epic noodle casserole. If I'm overfull, I don't beat myself up. I remind myself to be conscientious next time. I try not to follow societal tropes like “clean your plate” or mindlessly eat to the end of a bag of chips (or restrict myself from having the entire bag if that is, in fact, what I'm hungry to do!).

Resch and Tribole describe intuitive eating as “seeing satisfaction as a focal point in eating...using nutri-



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REAL LIFE

tional information without judgment and respecting your body, regardless of how you feel about its shape.” There are no “good” or “bad” foods...only food your body wants or doesn't. When I paid attention to my body, I saw that it wanted fruits and veggies, not only ice cream and candy—a big fear at first.

Weight loss isn't a goal anymore. Before, my body fluctuated a lot, which some consider unhealthy. For a few years now, I've been at what I consider my natural size. I've embraced that I'm not made to be small. I'm voluptuous, healthy, and happy.

12:45 p.m.

I ask our server about the entrée I'm ordering, huevos rancheros. Do I want a side? He says it depends on how hungry I am. We go back and forth, laughing as I make my internal monologue external. I'll take the entrée, I say; if I want more, I'll tell him.

Midway through the meal, I pause to check in (an important part of intuitive eating): Am I still hungry? Do I like this? I'm picky about tomatoes. There's too much tomato happening. I scrape it to the side so I can enjoy the dish.

Brunch ends. I have a meeting in an hour. If I go to the coffee shop and order food, it will overwhelm my stomach. I don't eat because I'm bored. In high school, I took study breaks in the kitchen. Cookies, gummy bears, banana bread—I ate to occupy my thoughts. Today, I walk to Central Park to read.

“Initially, intuitive eating just seemed like a new way to eat,” says Susie Orbach, author of *Fat Is a Feminist Issue*, who helped pioneer the practice's concepts. “Then it became clear that it was a way to relate to emotional appetites of all kinds.”



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Like when you're getting sick or overtired. These, too, are messages a body gives.

Heeding the messages can be tough, especially outside a routine. Early in my recovery, I went to India. I had gotten pretty good at listening to my body at home, but on the other side of the world, I was haunted by negative thoughts about my size. I even considered doing the hotel's cleanse diet. But that went against what I was learning to do. Although diet plans seem easy, no plan fits what an individual body needs.

3:30 p.m.

At the café, my colleague asks if I want to split food. I thank her and tell her I'm full from brunch. When her food

comes, she offers again; again, I decline. It's easy to feel pressure to eat what others are eating. Intuitive eating says listen to yourself first.

It starts by identifying hunger, says Andrea Hamilton, PhD, a clinical psychologist who specializes in eating disorders. “There's the familiar stomach growl, but there are subtler signs too: irritability, restlessness, fatigue, dry mouth. Not everyone recognizes these cues.”

7:00 p.m.

Tonight a friend and I are going out for Japanese. I get vegetable tempura over rice. I eat fast because it's good, I'm hungry, and I'm enthralled in conversation. I take a break to check in and slow down.

Hours later, I open my e-mail to find a message from an ex. I feel stuck, triggered, upset. In the past, I would

have binged, downing a frozen deep-dish pizza or animal crackers laced with frosting, anything to fill myself with food. Now, I process emotions another way: phone a friend. It took practice to get here. Weeks, months, years. Early on, I adopted the mantra “Purging is not an option.” It's ingrained in my brain.

Quieting my obsessive thoughts on food and body image enabled me to fill my life with much more. I'm present when I share meals. I love food: pasta drenched in Parmesan, spinach and feta omelets, chocolate-chip cookies. I never know the calorie or fat or sugar count in anything. And I love my body. I do. That's what I got when I relinquished judgment—and that's pretty satisfying. ■