

LifeSkills

How to maintain a healthy relationship with food

Our relationship with food can affect our physical and psychological well-being. We become especially aware of this during those times in our lives when our relationship with food changes and becomes unhealthy.

When food is much more than just food

When this happens, food is no longer seen as nourishment for the body but a means of dealing with some emotional or psychological problem. Some people react to these problems by eating too much or going on a crash diet.

Here are some considerations that can help you keep a healthy relationship with food.

Trust your body's signals

The body is a very reliable instrument. It tells you when it needs food (feeling hungry) and when it does not (feeling you've had enough). An important key to a healthy relationship with food is to trust the signals your body is sending.

The problem with diets

There are several problems with popular weight loss diets. One is that weight loss diets upset and distort the body's built-in signals that tell us when we're hungry and when we're satisfied. The other serious consequence is that diets tend to decrease the body's metabolism, that is, they slow the rate at which the body burns calories. Since burning off calories is how the body controls weight, the diet's result is the opposite of what is intended.

Comfort food is good

A friend remembers how her Belgian grandmother used to make her crepes, or pancakes, when she came to visit her as a young girl. Her grandmother's crepes are this friend's comfort food and when she makes them now for her family, they bring back the feelings of warmth and comfort she experienced in her Belgian grandmother's kitchen.

Healthy eating does not mean you have to give up your favorite comfort food.

Comfort food increases our feeling of psychological well-being which is a healthy place to be.

Food is not a magic happy pill

Turning to comfort food—or any food for that matter—in response to an emotional downturn is counterproductive. Anxiety over work or money, feelings of guilt for not having called a friend or done something you promised to do are often the cue for people to reach for the cookie jar. It may almost become an automatic reaction. Rather than go for the cookie, deal with the problem, whatever it might be. Using food as a magic happy pill just doesn't work.

Look for other sources of gratification

One way to avoid using food to ease feelings of anxiety or guilt is to make a mental list of those things that make you feel good about yourself.

These could include your friends and family, your love of gardening, whatever. Rather than reach for the box of donuts, take a walk, weed your garden, call a friend. These are much more reliable sources of well-being, and they are fat free!

Feel good with your body

Some people worry that they don't look like a skinny fashion model or a hunky life guard. This only keeps them from feeling good about their body and themselves. Consider the parts of your body that you like.

Make your coffee break a health break

Rather than another coffee, go for some fruit, fruit juice, or yogurt on your morning or afternoon break at work.

A small, healthy snack every three or four hours boosts your energy level and helps reduce your craving for a big lunch or dinner.

Give yourself time to play

Exercise has benefits beyond providing a good workout. It is not about just burning calories. While it is good for your physical and psychological health, there is also the satisfaction of learning a new sport or of having fun in a recreational activity.

When to seek help

Some eating behaviors upset the organism and can pose definite health risks. These include dental problems, menstrual problems for women, and definitive loss of bone supply. If you restrict your food intake excessively, abuse laxatives, practice self-induced vomiting, or train seven days a week to burn calories, you should consult your physician.

Try the strategies we have suggested and observe the consequences. Doing so should help you reach the goal of maintaining a healthy relationship with food.

An unhealthy relationship with food is often related to learned attitudes but it is possible to learn new ones. If you have trouble learning these new attitudes by yourself, you should seek professional help.

Suggested reading

If you would like to learn more about this topic, we recommend the following book:
Susan Kano. *Making peace with food*. New York: Harper and Row 1989.

La version française de ce document sera disponible sur Internet sous peu. Vous pouvez vous la procurer en composant le 1-800-668-4125.

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