

Intuitive Eating

Rebuilding trust with food, your body and yourself

Intuitive Eating is a non-diet framework designed to help people move away from rigid dieting and reconnect with internal cues, satisfaction, body respect and flexible nutrition. It is not simply 'eat anything whenever you want', and it is not a weight-loss diet. For some people, especially those with eating disorders, ARFID, diabetes or unreliable hunger cues, the principles need thoughtful adaptation and professional support.

The ten principles

Principle	In everyday language
Reject the diet mentality	Notice the promise that the next diet will finally fix everything.
Honour your hunger	Respond to the body's need for adequate and regular nourishment.
Make peace with food	Reduce forbidden-food rules and deprivation.
Challenge the food police	Question guilt, morality and rigid internal rules around eating.
Discover satisfaction	Let pleasure and enoughness matter.
Feel your fullness	Notice comfortable fullness without turning it into another rule.
Cope with emotions with kindness	Build options for emotional care without shaming emotional eating.
Respect your body	Treat the body with dignity now, not only after it changes.
Movement - feel the difference	Focus on how movement feels and functions, not only calories.
Honour health with gentle nutrition	Use nutrition knowledge flexibly, without demanding perfection.

Not another set of rules

The principles are guides, not boxes to pass. Turning intuitive eating into a new perfection project can recreate the very rigidity it is intended to reduce.

Hunger, Fullness & Satisfaction

Hunger can be physical and practical

Hunger may show up as stomach sensations, low energy, irritability, difficulty concentrating, thoughts about food or a sense that something is missing. Waiting until extreme hunger can make eating feel urgent and chaotic.

Hunger cues are not always reliable

Stress, ADHD, autism, medication, illness, dieting history, eating disorders and busy routines can all reduce awareness of hunger. In these situations, planned or regular eating may be more supportive than waiting for a strong internal signal.

Fullness

Fullness is also individual. It may be noticed through stomach sensations, reduced interest in food, slowing down or a sense of comfortable completion. The aim is curiosity, not stopping at a prescribed number on a scale.

Satisfaction

A nutritionally balanced meal may still leave a person searching for food if it was not enjoyable or satisfying. Taste, texture, temperature, familiarity and emotional context all contribute.

A gentle check-in

Before eating	During/after eating
How long since I last ate?	Is the food satisfying?
What does my body need right now?	Am I becoming comfortably full?
What food feels accessible and appealing?	Would more help me feel nourished?
Do I need something quick and predictable?	How do I feel physically and emotionally?

Permission matters

When foods are repeatedly forbidden, they can become more psychologically powerful. Genuine permission to eat can reduce the deprivation that drives preoccupation for some people, although this process may take time.

Making Peace with Food & Challenging Food Rules

Food is not a moral test

Words such as 'good', 'bad', 'clean', 'naughty' and 'cheat' can attach morality to eating. A food can have a different nutritional profile without making the person who eats it better or worse.

Notice the food police

Common thoughts include: 'I shouldn't eat after 7 pm', 'I must earn dessert', 'I ruined today so I may as well keep eating', or 'I was good because I skipped lunch'. Intuitive eating invites you to examine whether these rules support health or create distress.

Gentle challenge

Rigid rule	A more flexible response
I must never eat chocolate	Chocolate can be one food among many; I can choose it without needing to compensate.
Carbs are bad	Carbohydrate is an important energy source; type and amount can be chosen for my needs.
I need to earn food	Food is a basic need, not a reward that must be earned.
I failed because I ate past fullness	One eating experience is information, not failure.
Healthy eating must be perfect	Patterns over time matter more than a single meal.

Emotional eating

Food can soothe, celebrate, connect and comfort. Emotional eating is not automatically a problem. It becomes more concerning when it is the only available coping strategy, causes significant distress or occurs alongside restriction, bingeing or compensatory behaviour.

Expand the coping toolbox

Rest, sensory regulation, talking to someone, music, movement, warmth, distraction, journalling, problem-solving and professional support can sit alongside food rather than being used to police it.

Gentle Nutrition Without Diet Culture

Nutrition still matters

Intuitive eating does not reject nutrition. 'Gentle nutrition' means using evidence about protein, fibre, fats, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals while also considering pleasure, culture, accessibility, appetite and personal needs.

Think addition

Instead of asking only what to remove, consider what might make a meal more sustaining: protein, fibre, a carbohydrate source, a nourishing fat, fruit or vegetables, or simply enough total food.

Regular nourishment

Some people benefit from a loose meal-and-snack rhythm, especially while rebuilding hunger cues. Structure and intuition are not opposites when structure is being used to support the body rather than control it.

Practical meal examples

Situation	Flexible option
Low energy morning	Toast plus eggs/yoghurt, or cereal with milk and fruit.
Busy lunch	Sandwich/wrap plus a protein source, fruit and a snack.
Comfort meal	A familiar favourite with additions that make it more sustaining.
Limited appetite	Smaller, more energy-dense meals/snacks at regular intervals.
Sensory overload	A predictable safe meal rather than forcing variety at the wrong moment.

Movement

Movement can support strength, cardiovascular health, mobility, mood and regulation. An intuitive approach asks what kind of movement feels accessible and supportive rather than using exercise to compensate for eating.

Body respect

Body respect does not require loving every part of your appearance. It can begin with meeting basic needs, wearing comfortable clothes, seeking healthcare, resting and reducing harmful self-talk.

ARFID, Neurodivergence, Diabetes & Eating Disorders

ARFID

Classic intuitive-eating advice may not fit ARFID when hunger, sensory acceptance, fear or interest in food is limited. Waiting for appetite or prioritising variety can reduce intake. Safe foods, predictable structure and adequate nourishment may need to come first.

Autism and sensory needs

Internal body signals can be difficult to identify, and sensory preferences may strongly shape what is edible. Intuition can include respecting sensory information rather than forcing foods that feel intolerable.

ADHD

Hyperfocus, time blindness, medication and executive-function demands can lead to missed meals. Alarms, visible snacks, prepared foods and routine can be forms of body support rather than failures of intuition.

Diabetes

Diabetes requires attention to carbohydrate, glucose, medication and sometimes timing. Intuitive principles can still support a less judgemental relationship with food, but medical safety and treatment needs remain important.

Eating-disorder recovery

During recovery, hunger and fullness cues may be disrupted. A meal plan or regular eating structure may be needed before relying on internal cues. Permission, satisfaction and body respect can be introduced alongside specialist treatment.

Trauma and body awareness

For some people, tuning into the body can feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Body awareness can be approached gradually and with choice: nobody needs to force intense interoceptive exercises.

Intuitive eating should become more flexible when a person's needs are complex, not demand that the person fit the framework.

Reflection, Myths & Further Support

Common myths

“Intuitive eating means eating junk food all day.” It includes satisfaction and gentle nutrition. **“You can only eat when physically hungry.”** Practical, social and planned eating can all be valid. **“It guarantees weight loss.”** Weight loss is not the goal or promised outcome. **“You should instantly know your hunger and fullness.”** Reconnection can take time. **“Structure is forbidden.”** Supportive structure can be essential.

Personal reflection

- Which food rules take up the most space in my mind?
- Can I notice hunger without requiring myself to wait until it becomes extreme?
- Which foods leave me physically and emotionally satisfied?
- Do I give myself genuine permission to eat, or permission with hidden conditions?
- Can I add nourishment rather than automatically removing foods?
- What helps me care for emotions besides food - and can food still sometimes be part of comfort?
- Do sensory needs, ARFID, ADHD or medication affect my body cues?
- Am I using movement for care or as punishment?
- What would body respect look like today, even if body love feels unrealistic?

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

Rebuilding trust with food can be slow, especially after years of diets, rules, sensory difficulties or feeling disconnected from your body. You do not need to become perfectly intuitive. Curiosity, enough nourishment and a little more kindness around eating are meaningful steps. Food freedom can grow one choice at a time.

Books and further reading

Intuitive Eating by Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch - the foundational book describing the ten principles.

The Intuitive Eating Workbook by Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch - structured reflection exercises for exploring the framework.

Evidence and support: registered dietitians and appropriately trained eating-disorder professionals can help adapt non-diet approaches to individual medical, sensory and psychological needs.

Educational information only. This guide is not a substitute for eating-disorder treatment, diabetes care or personalised dietetic/medical advice.