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A practical, reflective workbook for understanding food, reducing shame and building greater safety, flexibility and self-trust.

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This workbook is

A place to understand patterns, notice needs, practise flexibility and create practical support without grading yourself.

This workbook is not

A diet plan, weight-loss programme, exposure challenge, food morality test or replacement for specialist care.

How the pages work

Each information section includes reflection questions and practical ideas. The workbook pages are designed to be written on or typed into after downloading to a compatible PDF app. You do not have to complete every exercise.

Progress may look like more choice, less fear, more reliable nourishment or simply understanding yourself better.

Welcome

Food can carry comfort, fear, routine, culture, sensory safety, memories, shame, control, grief and connection. If eating has become complicated, the aim here is not to tell you to 'just eat normally'. It is to understand what makes food difficult and what creates enough safety for nourishment to become more possible.

You may recognise restriction, forgetting to eat, fear of unfamiliar foods, emotional eating, rigid rules, a narrow range of safe foods, eating beyond comfortable fullness, body checking, guilt after meals or simply spending far too much mental energy thinking about food. Different patterns need different support.

Go slowly

Write a sentence or a page. Circle words. Leave a question blank. Return later. Stop if a section becomes too activating.

Use support

If eating is significantly affecting physical health, functioning or nourishment, use this alongside appropriate medical, dietetic or therapeutic support.

Urgent care matters

Seek urgent medical advice for fainting, severe weakness, dehydration, chest pain, inability to keep down food or fluids, repeated purging or rapid physical deterioration. Significant restriction and eating-disorder symptoms may require specialist assessment.

Where am I now?

Before trying to change anything, take a snapshot. Notice meals, snacks, drinks, shopping, cooking, sensory needs, social eating, body image and the amount of planning or recovery eating seems to require. Patterns make more sense when we look at their function: repetition may create sensory safety; skipping meals may follow muted hunger cues; intense evening eating may follow under-eating earlier in the day.

Look for hidden effort

Planning, checking, calculating, reassurance-seeking, negotiating, recovering after meals, avoiding places or hiding eating.

Look for safety

Predictability, familiar brands, quiet spaces, certain people, routine, easy foods, preferred textures or eating alone.

When is eating easiest for me, and what makes it easier?

When is eating hardest, and what usually happens before it?

What do I wish other people understood about my eating?

My food story

Our current relationship with food is shaped by experience. Family attitudes, school, dieting, poverty, allergies, illness, culture, sport, bullying, body comments, social media and previous treatment can all influence what food comes to mean. Messages learned years ago can continue to feel like facts long after the original context has changed.

It helps to separate facts from judgements. 'This texture makes me gag' is information. 'I am difficult because I cannot eat it' is a judgement. 'I need predictable foods when overwhelmed' describes a need. The aim is not to blame people from the past; it is to understand what you learned and decide what still belongs in your life.

Messages that can linger

Finish everything. Be good. Do not waste food. You should eat that. That food is bad. You look healthier/thinner. You are fussy.

Messages we can replace them with

My body deserves fuel. Sensory needs count. I can stop judging food morally. Safe food still nourishes me. I can learn at my pace.

A food message I remember hearing was...

How did it affect me then, and how does it affect me now?

Food rules, guilt and permission

Food rules may concern timing, quantity, ingredients, calories, body size, exercise, eating in public or whether you feel you have earned a meal. Rules often promise certainty, but rigid certainty can increase fear, preoccupation and guilt. Structure itself is not a problem: planned meals, reminders and repeated safe foods can all be supportive when they serve your needs rather than control you.

Permission is not chaos

Permission can mean allowing enough food, eating before you are desperate, including foods you enjoy, adapting meals to sensory needs, or allowing yourself to choose a safe food without shame. A flexible structure can still have routine - it simply has room for real life.

One rule that takes a lot of energy from me is...

A kinder, more flexible version of that rule might be...

Hunger, fullness and wider body cues

Hunger is not always a growling stomach. It can show up as tiredness, irritability, headache, feeling cold, difficulty concentrating, shakiness, nausea, dizziness or persistent thoughts about food. Hunger cues may be muted by stress, medication, neurodivergence, illness or a history of restriction. Waiting for strong hunger is not always the safest strategy.

Fullness can also be subtle. It may be reduced interest in food, a change in taste, physical pressure, warmth, satisfaction or simply knowing that enough time and food have passed. There is no perfect stopping point. For some people, eating by routine is more reliable than waiting for clear internal cues.

Early signals

Low energy, less patience, difficulty focusing, thinking about food, feeling cold, subtle emptiness, mild nausea.

Later signals

Shakiness, headache, dizziness, urgency, eating very quickly, emotional intensity, feeling unable to decide.

My early signs that I may need food are...

What helps me notice or respond before I become depleted?

Sensory needs, safe foods and neurodivergence

Texture, smell, temperature, appearance, sound, brand, packaging and predictability can determine whether a food feels possible. A familiar food may even become unsafe when stress or sensory load is higher. This is not stubbornness. Pressure can make a nervous-system response stronger.

Build reliability first

Keep safe foods available. Reduce unnecessary sensory load. Use preferred plates, temperatures, separation, packaging or quiet. Repetition is allowed.

Expand only with consent

Micro-steps can include having a food nearby, opening it, smelling it, touching it or changing one small feature of a familiar meal. Eating it is not the only success.

Sensory features that help food feel safe...

One environmental change that could make eating easier...

Emotional eating, stress and coping

Food can soothe, stimulate, distract, reward, create routine and offer comfort. Emotional eating is not a moral failure. The difficulty comes when food becomes the only available coping strategy, when it causes distress, or when it is followed by punishment and restriction.

Before judging an eating episode, ask what happened first. Were you lonely, anxious, angry, overstimulated, exhausted, under-fed, bored, grieving or needing a break? Physical hunger and emotional need can exist together. Removing food without meeting the underlying need can intensify the cycle.

Add care alongside food

Warmth, sensory regulation, music, movement, sleep, journalling, contact with someone safe, creativity, grounding or simply stopping for ten minutes.

Check for deprivation

Strong evening urges can be amplified by not eating enough earlier. Regular nourishment can reduce urgency without denying the emotional need.

What emotions most often change the way I eat?

What does food give me in those moments, and what could I add alongside it?

Body image and self-respect

Body image changes with stress, clothing, mirrors, photographs, pain, hormones, comments and comparison. A difficult body-image day does not mean your body has become objectively worse. You do not need to love your appearance every day to care for yourself.

Body neutrality can be more reachable than body love. Respect may look like wearing comfortable clothes, eating regularly, seeking healthcare, reducing body checking, resting, limiting comparison and refusing conversations that moralise body size.

Reduce checking

Less weighing, mirror checking, pinching, comparison photos, trying on triggering clothes or repeated reassurance-seeking.

Increase respect

Comfort, nourishment, healthcare, rest, boundaries, kinder media and movement that supports rather than punishes.

What tends to trigger difficult body-image days?

What would body respect look like this week?

Workbook: My food relationship map

Use this page to map what supports eating and what gets in the way. This is not a food diary. The aim is to see the whole picture, including sensory, emotional, practical and social factors.

Think about what helps

Time, place, company, routine, hunger level, low sensory load, familiar brands, ease of preparation, privacy, support.

Think about what gets in the way

Overwhelm, nausea, pressure, comments, decision fatigue, rules, body image, cost, smells, textures, fatigue, fear.

Food feels easiest when...

Food feels hardest when...

My most reliable safe foods or meal patterns are...

The biggest pressures around food are...

What I want more of in my relationship with food...

What I want less of in my relationship with food...

What to do with this map

Choose one pressure you can reduce and one source of safety you can strengthen. You do not need to tackle the hardest part first. Often the strongest starting point is making existing nourishment easier.

Progress may first appear as less distress or less mental effort, even before food variety changes.

Workbook: Flexible food rules

Choose one rule only. Understanding the rule is the first task; changing it can come later. A rule may have once helped you feel safe, accepted or in control, so approach it with curiosity rather than criticism.

The rule I notice - write it exactly as it sounds in my mind...

Where I think it came from - family, dieting, culture, health advice, sport, social media, past treatment...

What following the rule gives me - predictability, safety, approval, control, reduced anxiety...

What following the rule costs me - energy, spontaneity, nourishment, social freedom, time, confidence...

What I fear would happen if I loosened it...

What evidence supports that fear, and what evidence challenges it?

A more flexible replacement statement I could actually believe...

Language shift

Try replacing 'I must' with 'I usually', 'I cannot' with 'I am not ready yet', or 'I should not' with 'I can choose'.

Remember

You do not have to break a rule immediately. Recognising it as a rule rather than an unquestionable fact is already movement.

Workbook: Hunger, energy and emotion check-in

This check-in goes beyond a hunger scale. If body signals are hard to identify, time since eating, changes in energy and emotional state can still provide useful information.

Before eating

Body sensations, energy, focus, emotion, stress, time since food and what feels possible.

After eating

Changes in body comfort, energy, concentration, urgency, mood, sensory experience and satisfaction.

Before eating - what do I notice in my body and energy?

What emotion or stress level is present?

What food feels possible right now?

After eating - what changed?

What did I learn rather than judge?

Safe-food and support plan

Prepare this for low-energy, overwhelmed or sensory-heavy days so you do not have to make every decision when capacity is already low.

Reliable safe foods / drinks...

Very low-effort or ready-to-eat options...

Sensory adjustments that help...

Reminders, routines or people who help me eat...

Signs that mean I need professional or urgent support...

Anonymous personas: four different journeys

These are fictional composites for education. They are not identifiable clients and are not direct therapy quotations.

A - permission after restriction

A had spent years judging the day by how little they ate. Breakfast felt undeserved unless exercise came first. Their first change was eating breakfast without compensating later. Guilt remained, but they began to see it as a learned response rather than proof that eating was wrong.

J - sensory safety first

J has strong texture and smell sensitivities and a small range of reliable foods. Pressure made eating harder. Their work began with dependable nourishment, reduced shame around safe foods and tiny optional exposures that did not require swallowing.

R - busy all day, urgent at night

R often forgot food while working and then felt frightened by intense evening hunger. Adding predictable food earlier reduced urgency. The evening pattern became information about unmet physical needs rather than evidence of poor control.

S - comfort without punishment

S used food to slow down after stressful days. Attempts to ban comfort eating led to secrecy and guilt. They added other forms of regulation alongside food and stopped restricting the following morning. The cycle gradually became less intense.

Books, articles and support

Books to explore

Intuitive Eating - Evelyn Tribole & Elyse Resch

Anti-Diet - Christy Harrison

Sick Enough - Jennifer L. Gaudiani

The Body Is Not an Apology - Sonya Renee Taylor

The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook - Kristin Neff & Christopher Germer

UK support and information

Beat - eating-disorder information and support.

NHS - eating-disorder information and routes to urgent/GP care.

Mind - mental-health information.

Registered dietitians/therapists - individual support, ideally with ED/ARFID/neurodiversity knowledge where relevant.

Choose resources carefully

Step away from material that increases fear of food, promotes rigid restriction, moralises eating, encourages rapid weight change or intensifies obsessive tracking. A useful resource should increase understanding and support, not shame.

Which persona or resource feels most relevant to me, and why?

A message from me

If food has become complicated, I want you to know that you do not have to solve everything at once. Sometimes the most important first step is simply understanding why eating feels difficult for you.

Your needs may not look like somebody else's. You may need routine, sensory safety, reminders, familiar foods, company, professional support, or permission to stop measuring yourself against an idea of how eating 'should' look. Those needs deserve to be understood rather than dismissed.

I would encourage you to notice the changes that are easy to overlook: eating before you become depleted, keeping a safe food nearby, challenging one old rule, asking someone to sit with you, recognising an emotion without punishing yourself, or choosing comfort and nourishment on a difficult day.

What I hope you take with you

Healing is not a performance. You are allowed to build a relationship with food that works with your body, your nervous system, your history and your life. Progress may be quiet. It still counts.

*Maggie Learoyd
Space to Breathe Therapy*

My next steps

One thing I understand about myself now...

One thing I want to stop judging myself for...

One small change that feels realistic rather than overwhelming...

Support I may need from other people or professionals...

A sentence I want to remember on a difficult food day...

For a difficult day

I do not have to earn nourishment. I can respond to what my body and nervous system need today.

For progress

I am looking for greater safety and choice, not perfection.

Final note

This workbook is educational and cannot diagnose or replace individual medical, dietetic or specialist eating-disorder treatment. Seek appropriate professional help if eating is affecting your physical health, daily functioning or ability to nourish yourself.

You can return to any page whenever you need it. A workbook does not have to be finished to have been useful.