

# JUST ONE DOUGHNUT

## From a pack of four

What happens in our mind when “I’ll just have one” becomes a rule, a test or a battle with ourselves.

### It is not really about the number

Imagine opening a box containing four doughnuts and telling yourself, before you have even tasted one, “I am only allowed one.” There is nothing automatically wrong with choosing one. You may genuinely want one and feel satisfied afterwards. The difficulty begins when the number becomes loaded with meaning: one means you were “good”, two means you lost control, finishing the box means you failed, or wanting another becomes evidence that something is wrong with you. At that point the doughnuts have become part of a psychological test rather than simply food.

This resource is not going to tell you that one doughnut is the correct portion, or that eating two, three or four is automatically a problem. Hunger, appetite, energy needs, circumstances and enjoyment vary. What matters here is the thinking around the food. Are you making a flexible choice based on what your body wants, or obeying a rigid rule because you are frightened of what it would mean to break it?

### When restriction makes food louder

A rule such as “just one” can sometimes make the remaining three doughnuts much more mentally noticeable. You know they are there. You may repeatedly think about them, bargain with yourself, avoid the kitchen, promise yourself one tomorrow, or spend far more mental energy resisting them than you would have spent simply responding to hunger and satisfaction. Restriction can increase preoccupation with food, particularly when the body is also underfed or when somebody has a history of dieting or disordered eating.

This is one reason all-or-nothing thinking can become so exhausting. The first doughnut may be enjoyable. Then a second is eaten and the thought arrives: “I have ruined it now.” That thought can be more influential than the food itself. If the rule has already been broken, a person may feel there is no reason to stop and decide they might as well eat everything and “start again tomorrow”. The following day may then bring renewed restriction, creating a cycle of deprivation, preoccupation, eating, guilt and another attempt at control.

### Permission is different from pressure

Giving yourself permission to eat does not mean forcing yourself to eat all four. It means allowing the decision to be guided by hunger, satisfaction, preference and context rather than morality. You can eat one and stop because you are satisfied. You can eat another because you are still hungry or because you want it. You can save some without turning the leftovers into a test of willpower. Flexibility is the important part.

For somebody living with an eating disorder, ARFID, sensory differences, ADHD, autism or a long history of food rules, this may be much more complicated than it sounds. Interoceptive signals can be difficult to identify. Medication, stress, sensory needs, routine, scarcity experiences and previous restriction can all affect eating. The aim should therefore be curiosity and individual support, not another universal rule about what a “normal” amount looks like.

## A check-in before judging yourself

| ASK                                                                  | EXPLORE                                                                                                                       |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Why did I decide I was only allowed one?                             | Was it satisfaction, a practical choice, or fear about calories, weight, control or being judged?                             |
| If I want another, what story appears?                               | Notice words such as greedy, bad, weak, failed or ruined. These are judgments, not descriptions of nutritional need.          |
| Am I physically hungry?                                              | Hunger can be subtle, delayed or difficult to read. Consider energy, concentration, irritability and physical sensations too. |
| Would knowing I could have another later make this feel less urgent? | Reliable permission and availability can sometimes reduce scarcity thinking and preoccupation.                                |
| What happens if I eat more than planned?                             | Notice whether guilt leads to compensation, skipped meals, excessive exercise or promises to restrict tomorrow.               |

## Breaking the “I ruined it” moment

If you notice the thought “I have already ruined it”, try pausing before deciding what happens next. Eating more than you originally intended does not require punishment and does not make the rest of the day nutritionally meaningless. Ask what you need now. Perhaps you are satisfied and want to stop. Perhaps you are still hungry. Perhaps you were restricting earlier and your body is responding to deprivation. Perhaps an emotion has become tangled with the eating. Whatever the answer, the next decision can be made from the present moment rather than from a rule that says everything is either perfect or ruined.

Avoid compensating by skipping the next meal or trying to “earn” food through exercise. For people caught in binge–restrict patterns, compensation can help maintain the very cycle they are trying to escape. Returning to regular, adequate eating and seeking appropriate professional support is generally more useful than repeatedly tightening the rules.

## What can help

Try changing the language from “I am only allowed one” to “I can start with one and check in with myself.” That small change removes the pass-or-fail test. If having a multipack in the house produces intense anxiety or repeated episodes of feeling out of control, this is worth discussing with an eating-disorder-informed professional rather than treating it as a character flaw. Work may need to include regular eating, challenging food morality, understanding sensory and interoceptive needs, reducing restriction and building tolerance of having previously feared foods available.

## A message from me

Four doughnuts in a box should not have the power to tell you whether you are a good or bad person. One does not prove control and four do not prove failure. What interests me is what happens inside you when the box opens. Is there fear? A rule? Excitement? Scarcity? Guilt before you have even eaten? Are you trying to satisfy hunger, soothe an emotion or prove something to yourself? Those questions tell us far more than counting what is left in the box. Food can become incredibly complicated when years of rules sit around it. We can begin by making the conversation kinder.

## Clinical notes and sources

Eating-disorder treatment commonly considers dietary restriction, rigid food rules, compensatory behaviours, binge–restrict cycles and overvaluation of eating, shape or weight. NICE guideline NG69, Eating disorders: recognition and treatment, provides UK guidance on assessment and treatment. This resource is educational and does not define an appropriate portion size or diagnose binge eating from the amount of food eaten. People with eating disorders, significant restriction, recurrent binge eating, compensatory behaviours or physical symptoms should seek appropriate clinical assessment.

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