

TOP 5 TIPS TO Decrease Food Anxiety

Food rules are a HEAVY burden to carry. **They create shame and anxiety** in your relationship with food, take up your time and attention, and worst of all, disconnect you from your body's innate cues for when, what, and how much to eat.

Food rules are a form of restrictive eating and are easily identified as the **"shoulds"** and **"shouldn'ts"** of eating. They involve following external information, such as a diet plan, black and white ways of thinking, or a wellness influencer's advice, to determine your food choices or feelings about a specific food with disregard to your own body's signals, cravings, and feelings.

Food rule examples:

- "I can't have dessert unless I exercise today."
- "You have to eat everything on your plate."
- "I always have to order a salad when I eat out."



People may follow food rules because **they believe they are the key to a healthy lifestyle**, a particular body type, or because of misinformed social media messages. However, restricting foods you enjoy can make you crave them more and ultimately lead to binge eating.



How to start breaking food rules:

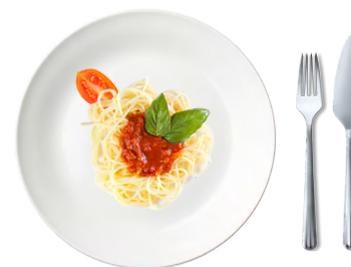
If you are ready to regain trust with your body and reduce anxiety around food, try these tried and true tips!

01

BEFORE YOU TRY CHALLENGING FOOD RULES, MAKE SURE YOU ARE EATING ENOUGH

Breaking food rules is not an easy task - it can bring up big emotions and feel overwhelming. Starting from a nourished place is extremely important. Adequate nourishment leads to a calmer nervous system and better ability to tolerate difficult tasks. It also allows you to make more logical decisions and check the facts.

If you are not sure if you are eating enough, consider making an appointment with an eating disorder informed clinician for support on this first step.



02

WRITE DOWN YOUR FOOD RULES AND BELIEFS

Create a list of all your food rules (and keep it handy in case you think of more!). Think about all aspects of eating when making this list. Do you have rules around what types of foods you are allowed to eat? What times or amounts can you eat? Where are you allowed to grocery shop? What can you order when you eat out?

Next, rank your food rules on a scale from 1 to 10 in order of how difficult it would be to challenge them. Consider making notes about why certain rules are more difficult to break than others.



Prompt: What would you gain by breaking one or more of these rules? How would your life be better considering the following aspects: time, money, attention, energy, relationships, and mental health?

03

CHOOSE A RULE TO INTENTIONALLY BREAK!

Start with the rule you rated as the easiest to break and make a plan to break that rule!

For example, if one of your rules is "I shouldn't eat after 7pm, even if I feel hungry," break the rule with a bedtime snack at 7:01pm.

This is a habituation process. The more often you challenge the rule, the easier it will become. **Start with breaking it one time per week, then increase to two times the next week, and so on.**



04

BUILD UP YOUR COPING TOOLS

We understand that people create and follow food rules because they feel like it keeps them safe from an underlying fear. In the example above, the rule that you cannot eat after 7pm may be followed because there is fear that eating at night will result in weight gain. It can feel impossible to challenge this rule even though it is ultimately based on misinformation.

It is important to find coping skills that help you carry out your intention to break your food rules, as well as those that help you manage your distress in the moment. Working with a professional trained in therapies such as dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) can be extremely helpful here.



The following are common coping skills our clients use when starting to break food rules:

- 1. STOP skill:** Stop, Take a step back, Observe, Proceed mindfully. This skill gives you a chance to push pause and check in with yourself. Observe how you are feeling. Think about your goals. Consider what will make you successful at your task of challenging your food rule. Then continue on mindfully with awareness and intention, rather than acting out of urgency or habit.
- 2. Opposite Action:** Determine what the food rule voice wants, then choose to do the opposite and break the rule.
- 3. Affirmations:** These are simple phrases that bolster your self-confidence. It may feel unfamiliar speaking to yourself with such kindness. You don't have to believe it at first, but with practice it becomes easier. Here are some of our favorites to get you started. Consider writing them down where you can easily see them.
 - o I am capable of healing my relationship with food.
 - o I am willing to take the steps necessary to be happy and live the kind of life I have chosen for myself.
 - o I can trust my body to tell me what and how much to eat.
 - o I can trust my body to tell me when I have had enough to eat.
 - o I am moving in a positive direction towards my goals.

05

CREATE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR YOURSELF

Tell someone about your intentions to break your food rules! Having a trusted accountability person, whether that is a family member, friend, or professional, who you can check in with about how your challenges are going and provide support can make all the difference in the world!



Final thoughts

If you are worried that without your food rules you will feel out of control with food or only want to eat **"unhealthy"** foods for the rest of your life, you are not alone! **This is a VERY common fear, and one that we can easily dispel.**

People who find freedom from food rules discover they actually feel more attuned to their bodies and calmer around food than ever before. They are able to create a balance between eating for nutrition and health, and eating for pleasure, because they are able to rely on their body's internal systems and cues.

If you would like to learn more about how to trust your body's cues around food and create that balance, **we invite you to join our Unlearning Diet Culture group program!** We dive in even deeper to these elements (and so many more concepts related to healing your relationship to food and your body), devote hands-on time to practice these skill sets in a group setting, while supporting you every step of the way!

Click here to join our [Unlearning Diet Culture Group Program](#) starting October 3, 2024!