

## **USING INTUITIVE EATING PRINCIPLES IN THE TREATMENT OF BULIMIA NERVOSA AND BINGE EATING DISORDER**

- 1. Reject the Diet Mentality:** The National Eating Disorders Association reports that 35% of “normal dieters” progress to pathological dieting, and that 20-25% of these individuals develop eating disorders. ([www.eatingdisorderhope.com](http://www.eatingdisorderhope.com)). Trying to lose weight is the first step in a progression to restriction, deprivation, binging, and possibly purging. Diet mentality must be eliminated, as one of the first steps in healing BN and BED.
- 2. Honor Your Hunger:** Ignoring or delaying hunger can only lead to low blood sugar and release of brain chemicals that can trigger over-eating and binging. The body and brain must be fed in order to give reliable Intuitive Eating signals.
- 3. Make Peace with Food:** Even the slightest thought of deprivation or perception of future deprivation, caused by restricting types of foods and labeling foods as “good” or “bad”, can trigger binging/and or purging. Clients must give themselves unconditional permission to eat what they like and as much as they need. This will calm their feelings of deprivation and, consequently, will lower the risk of binging and/or purging.
- 4. Discover the Satisfaction Factor:** The more satisfaction that is derived from the eating experience, the less impetus there will be to eat beyond fullness. Satisfaction is found from choosing a desirable food, eating it slowly and mindfully, and eating in the absence of emotional distress. If an unsatisfying food choice is made, it raises the risk of continuing to hunt for satisfaction, until the “right” food is found.
- 5. Challenge the Food Police:** A regular practice of challenging distorted myths about food and replacing them with accurate scientific information and logical thoughts, will pave the way to a calmer eating experience. Developing a positive belief system about food, eating, and body will increase self-esteem and reduce the risk of binging. Speaking back to both the internal and external Food Police is also essential.

- 6. Respect Your Body:** Body acceptance may be very difficult when one has been bingeing and/or purging, but respecting the body is an attainable goal. Respecting the body includes honoring the body's need for food on a reliable basis, buying comfortable clothing and underwear, and pampering the body with massage, lotions, bubble baths, etc. Respect for body diversity will help the transition to ultimately accepting one's healthy, set-point weight.
- 7. Cope with Your Emotions Without Using Food:** One of the most important principles of Intuitive Eating involves learning how to tolerate difficult emotions without going to food as a coping mechanism. This includes acknowledging needs and learning how to speak up to get these needs met. It also involves building an emotional muscle, by practicing writing about the feelings, sharing them with professionals and trusted family members, friends, and mentors, and, finally, sitting with the feelings. When they are too difficult to bear, clients learn to distract themselves temporarily with non-destructive, nurturing behaviors, until they are able to tolerate the feelings.
- 8. Feel Your Fullness:** Once fear of deprivation is calmed and bingeing has subsided, clients will begin to feel their fullness signals more readily. Tools to help feel fullness include eating slowly, mindfully, and taking a time-out from time to time while eating, in order to check in with the stomach. Clients will learn to sit with the feelings of a full stomach, without attempting to relieve the discomfort by purging. They will also begin to accept the sadness that may arise when they realize that they've eaten enough and need to stop eating. Ultimately, clients will choose to eat an appropriate amount of food, based on the body's needs, because the uncomfortable feeling of being over-full will no longer be desired or tolerated.
- 9. Exercise—Feel the Difference:** For clients with Binge Eating Disorder, developing regular opportunities for movement will help to calm the mind, release tension, increase endorphins, and give time for self-reflection. For clients with Exercise Bulimia--yoga, stretching, and limited slow walks are appropriate until the compulsive need to burn off calories subsides.

**10.Honor Your Health—Gentle Nutrition:** The concept of nutritional health can only be introduced when the client no longer feels deprivation around food intake. This is often an organic process and will result from a client's increased desire for self-care and physical well-being. If this is introduced too early in the period of healing, a reversion to feelings of deprivation is likely.

(Note, there are guided practices aimed at helping clients develop the principles of Intuitive Eating in the audio book, *Intuitive Eating*, Elyse Resch and Evelyn Tribole, Sounds True Productions, 2009.)

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## HOW THE PRINCIPLES OF INTUITIVE EATING CAN BE MODIFIED IN THE TREATMENT OF ANOREXIA NERVOSA

1. **Honor your Hunger:** A client being treated for Anorexia Nervosa can always trust that if any signs of hunger are felt, the body is giving a message that there is a need to eat. This does not, however, mean that if no hunger is felt or noticed, that this is an accurate message that one does not need to eat. If this guideline is not emphasized, re-emphasized over time, and believed—then the “contract” to use Intuitive Eating as part of a client’s treatment will be broken.
2. **Feel your Fullness:** A client will need to accept that until a healthy weight is achieved, fullness signals will not be reliable! With Anorexia, comes slowed stomach emptying, which can lead to getting full very quickly and feeling full most of the time. An understanding of the limitations of this principle is critical during the period of weight restoration.
3. **Make Peace with Food:** A commitment to taking risks and eating the foods that one has been previously restricting is something that can be practiced, even at a low weight.
4. **Discover the Satisfaction Factor:** Eating foods that are desired and that are satisfying to the palette will empower a client. This can reduce the risk of a rebellious reaction that could be elicited from being told what to eat. Education about nutritional needs is important, but no set meal plans are implemented. Instead, there is guidance in helping to figure out what foods are enjoyable and may have been restricted. This is followed by the encouragement to take risks incorporating these foods into the client’s eating life. There is also support in gradually increasing the amounts of satisfying foods that are needed for weight normalization.
5. **Cope with Your Emotions Without Using Food:** In the case of a client healing from AN, this would shift to learning to cope with emotions, without restricting food or getting on the scale. The client will learn that pushing away feelings by counting calories, cutting out

foods, or weighing oneself can only give a false sense of control and offer no real solution to the problems. Instead, clients learn to talk with the members of the health care team, safe family members and friends, or, possibly, a trusted religious leader.

- 6. Respect Your Body:** A client is taught to accept that starving the body is the antithesis of respecting the body. In order to honor one's body, she/he needs enough food for nourishment and weight gain. Respecting the body would also mean accepting a normal, healthy size and not trying to change it. In addition, it is necessary to throw away any "anorexic" clothes, and make peace with the fact that they will never again fit. It is also important to buy comfortable clothes that will fit a healthy body.
- 7. Reject the Diet Mentality:** Many clients have seen the ill effects of dieting on friends and family members, and can be taught that dieting is a serious risk factor that can lead to an eating disorder (and likely may have led to the development of the client's eating disorder).
- 8. Challenge the Food Police:** The Food Police speak from the voice of the Anorexia. Clients learn to challenge these distorted thoughts and replace them with thoughts that come from the logical, emerging Intuitive Eater within. The first step is to let go of valuing perfectionism. The second step is to immediately get back on track any time there might be a reversion to a restrictive behavior. It is important to emphasize that this is a process, not a perfect, straight line to recovery!
- 9. Exercise—Feel the Difference:** A client needs to accept that any exercise beyond normal walking or gentle yoga would be counter-productive to the healing process. Clients will learn to look forward to the time when one's body can be trusted to give the signal about how much movement is just right and to feel the positive effects that movement can offer.
- 10. Honor Your Health—Gentle Nutrition:** The healthier that the client's body becomes, the more she/he can incorporate the concepts of gentle nutrition, without interpreting them in a restrictive manner. At this point clients can feel safe to include an appropriate amount of playfood and find a balance between nutritious food and playfood.

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