Pitch the Diets

By Ahuva Sofer

Picture this all-too-familiar scene: It's lunch time at school. You sit down to a healthy lunch, which is, of course, an oversized salad, topped with bean sprouts and of course, low-calorie, fat-free dressing. You finish your lunch, but still feel uncomfortably... unsatisfied. Out of the corner of your eye, you suddenly spot your friend indulging in an oversized bag of mini Oreos, while simultaneously complaining about falling off her diet. Of course, out of sincere goodwill and concern for your friend's health, you offer to help her with the gargantuan task of finishing the bag. You indulge. You feel gross. And your healthy lunch is history. Why does this scene seem so familiar to so many? What went wrong?

Here are some possible explanations for your unfortunate lunch fiasco:

You were still hungry because your lunch choice was pitifully short of the calories your body needed, especially since you were very active the day before. Besides, you don't even especially *like* salad, so you were simply craving some more satisfaction.

You felt so restricted by the stringent standards of your diet that your body resisted it and resorted to unhealthy mediums of satisfaction.

You also had a history test coming up that was getting on your nerves. And what calms frazzled nerves better than a bag of Oreos? Welcome to the never-ending cycle of dieting so many succumb to for such a great deal of their lives.

But you're not alone. According to *US News and World Report*, Americans spend $60 billion a year trying to lose weight. That means that the diet industry, which continues to amass more cash every year, has one secret to their ongoing success: *Diets don't work.* Because if they did, Americans would all be fit and trim, and the diet industry would be out of business. Why are diets unsuccessful more often than not? And is there an alternative to the never-ending diet cycle? This is where intuitive eating comes in.

What is Intuitive Eating?

The Intuitive Eating Concept is not a diet trend, but a mentality. According to Evelyn Tribole MS, RD, award-winning registered dietitian and coauthor of *Intuitive Eating*, healthy eating is defined by, "having a healthy balance of foods and a healthy relationship with food." It's about eating intuitively, about relearning to listen to and trust our bodies to make healthy choices.

Let's get down to some of the main principles of intuitive eating.

Reject the Diet Mentality

"Dieting often demands a regimen that is inflexible as well as impractical and unaccommodating in the face of the realities of life," says Mrs. Rena Reiser, an intuitive eating coach. "What happens when we get sick or have a late-night party or just indulge for a day? Once we fall off a diet, there's often little room to make a comeback — and the diet ends there.

"Even more importantly," says Rena, "by leaning on an external set of rules that tell us what, when, and how much to eat, we forget to tune in to the most important health indicator — our own bodies."

Make Peace with Food and Challenge the Food Police

Let's face it: so much of the energy invested in dieting is spent on the shameful feelings we have toward food and our need to indulge once in a while. "Call a truce and stop the fight!" cries Evelyn Tribole. "Scream NO to thoughts in your head that say you're 'good' for eating fewer calories or 'bad' because you ate a piece of chocolate," she says. By labeling certain foods "good" and certain foods "bad" and by restricting ourselves excessively, we begin to develop a relationship with food that revolves around feelings of deprivation and guilt. And guilt is the nasty culprit that often leads us deeper into the unhealthy cycle of eating that we call stress or binge eating. Only by making peace with food and allowing ourselves to enjoy its goodness, can we rid ourselves of guilty eating and allow ourselves to listen to and trust our bodies to tell us when and what to eat.

"As people, we do have a certain biological need for enjoyment and pleasure, which leads to satisfaction," says Rena Reiser. By allowing ourselves to appreciate food, whether it's a salad with a great dressing or even a (gasp!) chocolate chip cookie, we are maintaining a healthy level of satisfaction that ultimately curbs feelings of deprivation as well as the urge to overeat. So cut out the zero-tolerance policy for ice cream or chocolate from your diet. Honestly, it's okay to enjoy that cookie once in a while.

You Know What to Do!

1. Only eat when you're beginning to feel hungry.
2. Stop eating when you're beginning to feel full.
3. Engage in exercises you enjoy.
4. Before eating or snacking, ask yourself whether your food craving is physical or emotional.
5. Never allow yourself to reach the point of extreme hunger, which often leads to resistance and over-eating.
6. Work on consistent, gentle nutrition.
7. Choose healthy foods you actually enjoy!

Learn to Listen to Hunger and Fullness Signs from Your Body

"Honor your hunger and respect your fullness," says Evelyn Tribole.

As babies, we were given an innate wisdom to know when we are hungry and when we are beginning to feel full. Instead of trusting calorie numbers and food labels, learn to communicate with your body. We don't need to be told what time to eat lunch, how much food to put out on our plate, or whether or not to take seconds.

"Relearn the signs of hunger and fullness and start to make sense out of what you're feeling," continues Rena Reisner. "If you already had a plate of lunch and you're still feeling hungry because you were engaged in a lot of activity yesterday, you should be like, hey, it makes sense I'm still hungry. And, no, you don't have to finish your plate if you're *not* hungry. It's all about restoring our innate common sense to tell us how we're feeling."

Learn Self-acceptance, Self-love, and Self-respect

The media excels at selling the perfect body image and dictating to us exactly how we should look. However, every body is unique, with different needs and standards. "It's impossible and unrealistic for someone who wears a size-eight shoe to think she can squeeze into a size-six," says Evelyn. Being healthy means maintaining your natural body weight, not depriving your body of the essential calories and nutrients it needs.

"There is a serious shame factor involved in many of the women and girls I coach, who feel guilty about the way they look and feel," admits Rena. "But guilt does more harm than good. Even if we do want to lead more qualitative lives, before embarking on the path to a healthier lifestyle, we have to learn to love and accept who we are."

Respect Your Feelings

How many times do we indulge in a bag of potato chips, not because we're really enjoying it, but because it temporarily drowns out stress or other uncomfortable emotions? Stress eating results when we're confronted with emotions we simply aren't equipped to face.

"Learn the art of self-knowledge" might be the rallying cry of intuitive eating. Before grabbing that oversized bag, practice asking yourself whether it will give you genuine satisfaction, or just temporary emotional reprieve. Is the source of your craving physical or emotional? Will it result in a healthier, more satisfied *you*, or an even more stressed-out person than the one who first grabbed the bag of potato chips to begin with?

Learning to constructively handle uncomfortable emotions is also a major factor here. "I try to teach my clients not to fight or drown out their emotions, but rather to just to allow themselves to feel, to let the feelings ride through them," says Rena. Come up with more constructive ways to handle the discomfort. When life throws you curveballs, ditch the cookies, and instead, take a walk in the fresh air, talk to a friend (phone conversation minus the potato chips, please), read a book, or do something enjoyable that promotes relaxation and healing.

Stay Tuned In to Intuitive Eating

1. Say no to the food police, which banish certain foods from your diet.
2. Say no to the impossible dictates of the media and the diet trends.
3. Respect your body's health needs.
4. Respect your emotions and learn constructive ways to deal with them.
5. Embrace the art of self-acceptance and self-love.
6. Be intuitive to your body's needs.
7. Be realistic about your needs and goals.

Honor Your Health

Respect your body's needs and make smart health and food choices. Choose well-balanced, nutritious alternatives that will leave you feeling content and healthy. Consistent, gentle nutrition is necessary, but one cookie, one oversized meal, or one day of overeating shouldn't make or break your hard-earned relationship with food.

"Forget the militant exercise," says Evelyn. Exercising for the sake of burning fat and calories has little lasting motivation. Instead, get yourself moving doing activities and exercises you enjoy and feel their therapeutic influence on the mind and body. Walk to school on a nice day instead of carpooling, dive into a pool on a hot summer day, or play a good game of *machanayim* with friends.

"When I coach teens," says Rena, "I find that one predominant challenge they experience is the pressure to diet, which peers are creating. But who really enjoys dieting? Wouldn't it be great if we could use positive peer pressure to shift the focus from losing weight to becoming more intuitive to our needs? If the talk of the day were more about being intuitive and less about calories and numbers?"

Now that, my friends, is definitely food for thought. ★