

Vicious cycle of dieting

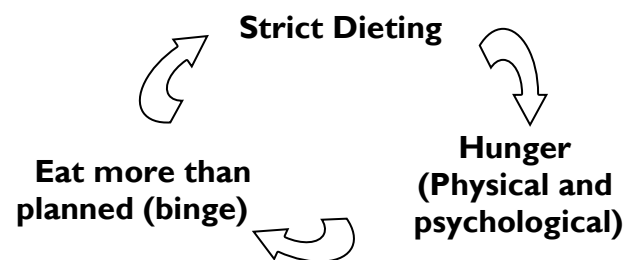
Dieting, hunger and over eating

Often when people are trying to lose weight or afraid of gaining weight they try to stick to a certain diet. These diets can be very restrictive, allowing only certain amounts of food or only certain types of food.

When we do not eat enough from all food groups we become deprived of what we need. This deprivation affects us in two ways. The first way is **physical hunger** - a physiological need from our body to get more food. Although some people who have an eating disorder lose that sense of physical hunger, their bodies are still craving adequate nutrition. The second way is a **psychological feeling of being deprived**, and developing a strong desire to eat the foods we have been denying ourselves. We become preoccupied with food, especially the foods that we tell ourselves we “can’t eat” or are bad”.



Over time, the physical and psychological pressure to eat builds up so much that we are driven to eat. We may eat more than we had planned, or eat foods which we have been trying to avoid, or we lose control and our eating turns into a binge. When this happens, we start to worry about how this eating will impact on our weight. We then decide that we need to diet more strictly than ever to ‘make up’ for breaking the rules of our diet. This sets us up for a vicious cycle, and sets us up to overeat or binge again. Furthermore, people with an eating disorder may feel the need to purge the food, in an attempt to compensate for the unwanted calories.



You may think that dieting is the solution to your fear of gaining weight and your desire to lose weight, but in fact dieting is more of a problem than a solution. It keeps you caught in a cycle of disordered eating.

Rigid rules

Many people have ideas that guide what they eat. For example, someone might have the guideline “I try not to eat too many sugary foods”. Having some guidelines about what we eat can help us maintain healthy eating.

However, sometimes people can develop **strict and rigid** rules about what they eat. For example, “I must never eat sugar at all”. Rules can be about when to eat, what to eat, and how much to eat.

A rule is different to a guideline because it is rigid—the rule is either followed or broken and there is no flexibility. Strict dietary rules are problematic because they are ‘all or nothing’ or ‘black and white’ in nature. This means when it comes to following the rules, our actions can only be ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ and we consider we have ‘succeeded’ or ‘failed’ rather than realise our bodies have merely responded to a physiological need.

This is a big problem. If we try to follow a rigid rule (e.g., “I must never eat sugar”), psychological and physiological pressures will build until we eventually break this rule. Although eating a few chocolates will not have any consequential effect on our weight, it will feel like a big deal because we have broken our rule. We might think: “I’ve blown it now, I may as well eat the whole bag” or “I’ve ruined today, I’ll start again tomorrow”. These thoughts can lead us to go from a small ‘slip’ in our eating to an episode of eating much more than planned.

Breaking dietary rules may also affect what we think about ourselves. We might think: “I’m disgusting” or “I’m a failure”. These negative emotional reactions are unpleasant. Many people respond to these emotional experiences by eating for comfort, which can lead to further breaking of dietary rules and the vicious cycle.

Escaping the vicious cycle

To avoid becoming hungry and deprived, and the likelihood of overeating or binge eating, we need to eat **enough food from all food groups**. You also need to **eat regularly**, every 3-4 hours. Under eating and eating infrequently can SLOW DOWN your metabolism, so that your body burns off the energy from food more slowly, and will conserve energy by storing it as fat.

Once you are eating regularly, you must eat enough food to stop yourself feeling hungry, and allow yourself to eat the foods you enjoy. Normal healthy eating includes daily consumption of foods from all food groups, including ‘occasional foods’ such as ice cream and chocolates. See our handouts on *Regular Eating*, *Normal Healthy Eating* and *Metabolism* for more information.

When your body has sufficient nourishment, your mind will stop constantly thinking about food and eating. You will no longer be driven to eat, and you will have broken the vicious cycle!