

HEALTHY VS. "NORMAL" EATING—THEN AND NOW

By Karen R. Koenig, LCSW, M.Ed.
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In the three decades I've taught and written about eating issues, I've noticed a sea change, not only in the eating habits of Americans, but in our orientation toward food, weight, and health. Back in the 1980s, when I first began teaching about "normal" eating, I rarely was asked about nutrition; now I'm bombarded with questions about sugar, fat, protein, Omega 3s and the like at every workshop I teach. I'm left shaking my head in wonder at how much more complicated resolving eating problems has become over the decades.

Even terms are confusing. Are "normal" and healthy eating the same thing? If not, how do they differ? Are the two concepts compatible or mutually exclusive? Is one better than the other? Although people may assume that healthy and "normal" eating are the same, they're not. The goal of healthy eating is to make sure one's food intake is nutritious and physically nourishing—upping your intake of high-nutrient foods and lowering your intake of foods which will likely endanger your health. "Normal" eating, on the other hand, means choosing and consuming foods according to conscious and intuitive rules of appetite: 1) Eat when you're hungry, 2) Choose foods that will satisfy you, 3) Eat with awareness and enjoyment, and 4) Stop eating when you're full or satisfied.

Think of it this way: Healthy eating teaches the *what* of eating and "normal" eating teaches the *how* of it.

Nutritional information—the *what* of eating—is ever changing, as researchers discover more and more about the effect of food on health and longevity. For example, we were told that tuna fish is a healthy, low-fat, high protein food—until the discovery that it can contain high levels of mercury and should be eaten sparingly. Another example is how we were discouraged from eating eggs when research pointed to it increasing our "bad" cholesterol, but now are told that eating a few eggs a week is fine.

While the *what* of eating may change, the process of *how* to eat is timeless. The rules of "normal" eating remain the same whether you're eating tofu or tiramisu. Eat when you're

moderately hungry—when your body needs fuel—which predisposes you to enjoy food more. Chew food thoroughly and let it sit on your tongue so that your taste buds can do their job of sending satiation signals to your brain. Seek pleasure in food and eat mindfully. Stop eating when you're no longer hungry or when you sense you've reached a point of satisfaction.

Trying to eat both for health and according to appetite can make your head hurt. You know what happens: You're longing for a burger with fries and the little voice in your head is screaming, "Oh, no, all that saturated fat—maybe even deadly trans fats—will clog my arteries." You're about to dive into a bowl of Cheerios drowning in milk and that same voice is reminding you that you're still two helpings short of fruit and vegetables according to the Food Pyramid. You really enjoy full-fat Greek yogurt, but worry about elevating your triglycerides.

I hear it all the time—clients lamenting that they can't figure out how to eat healthfully *and* "normally." Because they feel pressured to do both, they're uneasy doing one without the other. Sadly, they're so inundated with nutritional information, that their natural appetite and ability to choose satisfying foods are compromised. This dual allegiance is further complicated by the difficulty of separating healthy eating from dieting. When you eat a salad, is it because you want to lose weight or because your body craves leafy greens? When you order fish in cream sauce, is it because you're fed up with broiled everything or do you have a real yen for something rich and tangy? When you forgo dessert, are you really full or are you only being mindful of calories?

Another way you might get stuck is when you rebel against sticking to healthy foods. Many of my clients are so sick and tired of eating on the straight and narrow that they end up rebelling and sabotaging both their "normal" eating progress *and* their health by ignoring nutritious foods and heading for foods high in fat, salt and sugar—even if that's not what their body craves. The fact is that denying yourself nourishing foods today will never make up for all the yesterdays of deprivation. That was then and this is now and it's time to make peace with the past.

If you're angry about all the years you spent dieting, deal with that anger. If you're saddened by all the food denial you went through, feel the sadness and regret. Direct your feelings at the diet industry and our thin-obsessed culture. Don't shoot yourself in the foot and blame yourself. Okay, you fell for all the nonsense you were taught about needing to be slim. Well, hey, didn't we all?

Another road-block to eating "normally" and healthfully could be the all-or-nothing mindset

that's so characteristic of disregulated eaters. Too often, your natural tendency when confronted with opposing extremes is to think in terms of "or" rather than "and," and bounce from one to the other rather than look for a way to meld both or find a middle ground. Due to all your years of dieting and overeating, you may not believe that you can pay attention to appetite *and* to feeding your body nutritious foods.

Although there are no hard and fast rules about when to eat for nutrition and when to be guided purely by appetite, there are ways to find clarity. Begin by acknowledging your dilemma: that you're confused about how to eat "normally" *and* healthfully. Recognize that you might have reactions to each process on both intellectual and emotional levels, and that if you're frequently tugged in two directions—towards appetite or nutrition—you'll have to grapple with this issue over and over, meal by meal, until the in-fighting stops. Give up judging yourself for either way of eating; rather explore the larger issues of how you feel about eating, food, weight, or caring for yourself. Take an observational, rather than a judgmental, stance about your mixed feelings.

Explore your perspective on dieting and healthy eating—not what others tell you, but associations from your own experience. Make a list of your beliefs about diet foods, then another of your beliefs about healthy foods. How are they the same? How are they different? Where is the overlap? Does the memory of eating diet food trigger confusion and misguided thinking when you eat healthfully? If so, you're stuck with an outdated perspective on specific foods. It's not as if food gives itself meaning. Only you can do that.

If you have a lengthy history of dieting, you'll have to work hard to put a new spin on healthy eating. Some nutritious foods you may never want to eat again and that's okay. Maybe you gag at the thought of downing another cottage cheese and fruit plate, but love your veggies and adore fresh fish. So be it. Concentrate on nutritious foods you crave and enjoy, not ones that remind you of your diet days.

Our bodies are made to eat "normally" and wisdom tells us that it's a good idea, in the main, to eat nutritiously. However, when you begin the process of throwing off the diet mantle, you may need to put the goal of eating healthfully on hold—for a while. I recommend that clients first get comfortable eating "normally" before tweaking their eating to be more healthful. How long will this take? Usually from many months—say, the better part of a year—to a few years. The length of this process doesn't mean you have to wait to eat healthfully *until* you're a "normal" eater, but that you'll want to establish "normal" eating habits before adding another—often confusing—dimension to eating.

Toward this end, notice how you feel when you eat healthfully, including whether you still

think in terms of "good" and "bad" foods. Observe your self-talk about food and correct invalid messages to self from self. Remain aware that memories of your diet days will intrude upon your experience of how you want to feed yourself today. Talk to people about their struggles with eating for health and appetite. Never struggle alone with eating problems, but brainstorm with others and learn from them and with them how to become a healthy "normal" eater.

Develop a vision of yourself eating "normally" *and* healthfully. Spend time visualizing eating in a way that honors both goals. Remind yourself that these goals are realistic and doable and that they belong together. By doing so, you'll be creating a sense of wholeness about your eating, an integration of two kinds of pleasure and pride in knowing that you can use food to both please your palate and nourish your body.

About the Author

Karen Koenig, LCSW, M. Ed., is a psychotherapist, educator, motivational speaker, and author with nearly 30 years of experience helping chronic dieters and compulsive/emotional/restrictive eaters become "normal" eaters. Her books include:

- *The Rules of Normal Eating* (2005, Gürze Books)
- *The Food and Feelings Workbook* (2007, Gürze Books)
- *What Every Therapist Needs to Know about Treating Food and Weight Issues* (2008, W. W. Norton)
- *Nice Girls Finish Fat* (2009, Fireside)

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