

TIPS FOR EATING DURING A PANDEMIC

3 Tips for Managing Emotional Eating

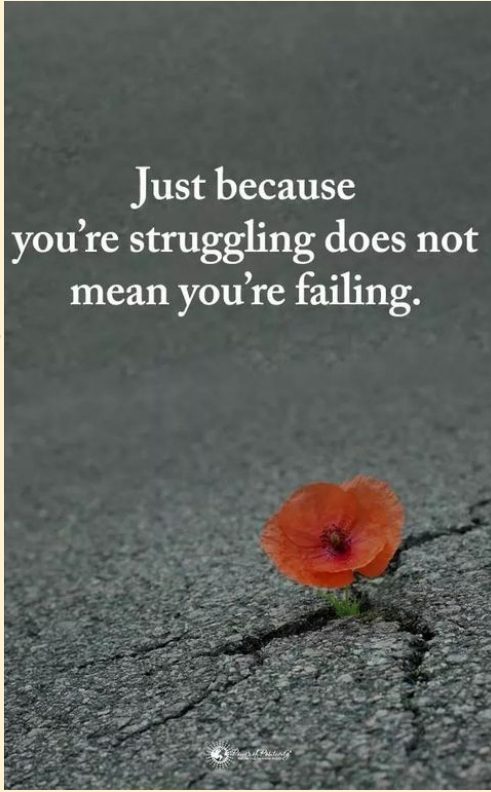


by Dr. Ginnie Taylor

During this unprecedented time of upheaval, loss, and transition stress, all of us must adapt to changes in virtually all areas of life, and that includes our experience with food and eating. With our current disconnection from our regular campus schedules and social lives, and the displacement from our rooms and campus setting, we are all adjusting to changes to not only where we eat and how we get our food, but what we eat, when we eat, and with whom. The collective covid-19 food stress from the food scarcity issues coupled with the widespread stock-piling expectations, to the anxiety-riddled awareness of the potential viral transmission during food shopping trips, has certainly further complicated any existing complex relationships with food and our bodies.

Just as the impact of the pandemic varies upon each individual life, how and to what direction and extent these factors affect us at the table vary significantly. For those who find themselves eating either more or less than what their body needs, or stressing more about what they eat due to these changes in food access and reductions in exercise/activity level, allotting some time for some self-compassionate reflection and some proactive coping and meal planning can help buffer the stress.

Although it's probably a safe assumption that no one is missing the long lunch lines at Usdan, some of us are finding ourselves in kitchens with higher volumes of less preferred shelf-stable foods, while others are experiencing even greater financial and logistical obstacles to sufficient and consistent access to food. For those needing to comply with special diets or struggling with disordered eating, the previously challenging task of finding tolerable and acceptable foods is significantly compounded.

A photograph of a small, vibrant orange flower with a dark center, growing out of a crack in a grey, textured concrete surface. The background is dark and out of focus.

Just because
you're struggling does not
mean you're failing.

There has been no shortage of diet culture messaging negatively targeting the higher energy, processed/packaged, and more carbohydrate-based foods like rice, bread, and pasta which would spare us more frequent trips to the store. Yet it can be overwhelming for some to overcome the voice that deems these foods as “unhealthy” or “fattening”. The “freshman 15” and social media tips to avoid gaining the weight, including not keeping snacks in one’s room, often unfortunately precedes students' first year arrival on campus.

The subsequent return home for many to the 24/7 unlimited kitchen access, now with stockpiled food, in addition to the loss of structure and socialization, can make it all the more challenging to avoid falling into less than regular, intuitive eating habits by either eating much more or much less than what our bodies optimally need.

Eating can provide a welcomed source of pleasure, distraction, escape from our troubled minds, or alleviation of boredom. Shared meals can strengthen social connections and mark cultural, family, and religious rituals. During this period of heightened stress and uncertainty, isolation and limited structure, we are more vulnerable to relying on food to manage these feelings. The same extra anxiety, sadness, and isolation during these turbulent times can increase or decrease our appetite, just as our sense of safety and comfort with the world can be heightened by eating large amounts of our preferred comfort and/or previously diet-forbidden foods, or alternatively by restricting ourselves from the quantity and range of foods that our minds and bodies typically need.



Noticeable shifts in our eating habits can be invitations to reflect on corresponding shifts in our emotional states and needs, so we can strive to make more conscious and mindful decisions about how to best support ourselves during stressful times.

Tips for Managing Emotional Eating



1-Building emotional awareness and acceptance

Despite our collective experience of having our campus way of life being abruptly replaced by virtual social and academic connections, how this emotionally affects us can vary by the person and by the day. For all of us, incorporating emotional check-ins to bring more awareness and mindful and nonjudgmental acceptance to our feelings, as well as the intensity of our feelings, is an important part of mindful and intuitive eating. We are particularly vulnerable to turn to emotional eating when we are feeling stressed, irritable, bored, or tired.

We also know that the simple act of labeling our feelings, expressing them to a supportive person, or even simply writing them down can be helpful to take the edge off. This includes emotions triggered by food and the act of eating. Recognizing and respecting the anxiety or guilt that can occur as we eat, can help us accept the healthy challenge of giving ourselves permission to eat a “feared food” due to diet messaging, and to better enable us to slow down, fully taste, and consciously enjoy the treat food that might otherwise be eaten too rapidly and consequently over consumed.

Weekly Meal Planner

Week of _____

	Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner	Snacks	Grocery List
Sunday					<input type="checkbox"/>
Monday					<input type="checkbox"/>
Tuesday					<input type="checkbox"/>
Wednesday					<input type="checkbox"/>
Thursday					<input type="checkbox"/>
Friday					<input type="checkbox"/>
Saturday					<input type="checkbox"/>

Note: The form includes a 'Grocery List' section with checkboxes and a small illustration of kitchen utensils and food items at the bottom right.

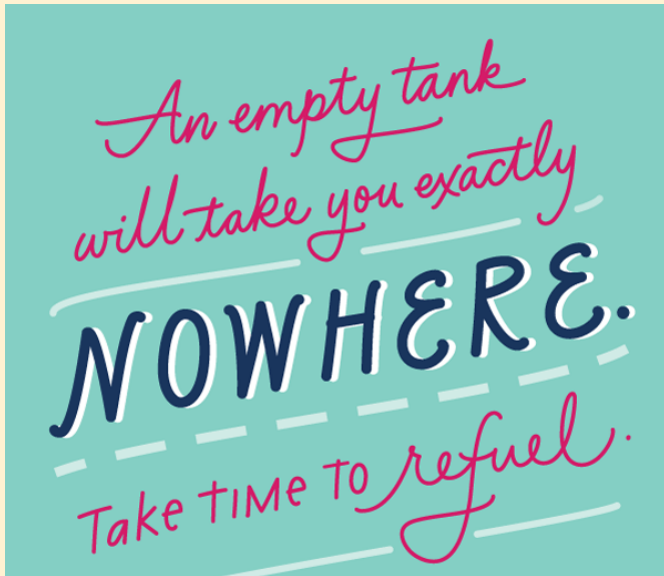
2-Creating structure with meal planning

Simply taking the time to make a list of preferred and available meal and snack options can provide a sense of calm and order when your eating feels out of control. For some, it's helpful to plan a day in advance, while for others planning out the week is better, especially for those who can benefit from maintaining a healthier perspective on their general nutritional intake as opposed to feeling the evaluative stress of judging every single meal. And for some, simply writing out the times in our daily schedules for planned meals and snacks can help maintain regular healthy eating and be the gentle reminder to not put off taking care of our basic needs. This is especially true when our emotions have affected our appetites as well as our ability to take care of ourselves.

In addition to certain emotional triggers, letting ourselves get too hungry can easily put us in that range of risk for overeating on treat foods or binge eating. **Following a meal plan with regular and adequate meals and snacks supports healthy regular eating and can help break vicious cycles of alternating undereating with overeating, as a sense of deprivation tends to fuel disinhibition.**

For those who have found themselves overeating or binge eating on certain foods or food types, such as carbs or desserts, regularly incorporating them during designated times with additional emotional supports, such as a planned virtual meal with a supportive friend, can gradually alter our relationship with that food item and reduce the excessive power that food may have over us. **The act of granting ourselves conscious permission to eat that certain food item rather than eating it only in response to strong emotional states or cravings is an important step.** It is not an unusual phenomenon for people to find themselves no longer craving and binging on the “forbidden foods” once they have divorced them from diet-culture judgments.

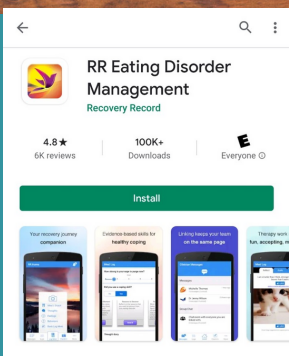
An important feature with meal plans is to preserve flexibility. Meal plans that support overcoming emotional eating are not designed to function as another rigid, externally driven diet. The purpose is for them to support individual taste and food preferences and assist people in making more conscious decisions about what foods best support their emotional and physical health. Flexibility includes keeping in mind that your body will need more or less of your planned meals/snacks based on the real-time conditions due to prior intake and activity level. We can trust our bodies to let us know what we need through the degree of hunger and fullness that we feel. The challenging part for us is to be good listeners.



3-Self-compassionate eating

It is hard to imagine a time where self-compassion, including how it pertains to our eating habits and our bodies, could be more relevant and indicated. Let us not get too focused on our food choices or the specific appearance of our bodies during these times, and let's not lose sight of the very real and unprecedented stress that is behind our stress eating. We can allow ourselves to appreciate the benefits we may get from stress eating and lend the kindness to ourselves that we often do for others under similar circumstances. **As we all experience stress in its most intense state, we are forced to attend to our experiences more, get to know ourselves a little better, and learn how we can better support ourselves and others.** Our strengthened awareness and skills acquired during this time will continue to benefit us in our lives beyond this period of heightened stress.

RESOURCES



Recovery Record Eating Disorder Management App
 App support for self-monitoring emotions and eating and incorporating coping and mindfulness tools to overcome disordered eating.

National Eating Disorder Association(NEDA)
 Helpline (800) 931-2237
 Crisis Text Line, text "NEDA" to 741741



HEALTH AT EVERY SIZE

Health at Every Size (HAES)
 @covid19eatingsupport
 ®-based clinicians offer live meal support every 2 hours beginning at 8am EDT daily.



Dr. Ginnie Taylor is a licensed clinical psychologist who joined the CAPS team in October 2018. She earned her BA in psychology on the East Coast [Princeton University] and her Ph.D. in clinical psychology in the Midwest [Kent State University], before completing her pre and postdoctoral training at a community mental health center and outpatient clinic on the West Coast [California's central coast]. Currently, she enjoys working with students from all parts of the country and the world without having to leave her office. She utilizes an integrative approach to psychotherapy, often drawing from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and adapting her approach and the pace to best meet the needs and preferences of each student. Areas of special interest include supporting students in overcoming eating and body image concerns, anxiety, depression, and identity and relationship stressors. Dr. Taylor co-facilitates the Intuitive Eating Workshop during non-pandemic times.

When not at work, and not watching movies, she most enjoys kicking a ball around and walking through the woods with her kids. Most recently she is enjoying the latest addition to her family so much, she's in the process of becoming a cat person to the disappointment of her dog.