Unapologetic Eating

Make Peace with Food and Transform Your Life

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For all the people who have ever thought
that they were “not enough”:

You are enough,
just as you are.

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Introduction

A couple of years ago, I posted a series of photos on social media of me eating a sandwich. Not just any sandwich, mind you; it was a big ol' Pub Sub from Publix, the well-known southern U.S. grocery store chain. (If you are ever near a Publix, you MUST get yourself a Pub Sub. Trust me.) In the images, I'm blissfully ignorant of the fact that my partner is taking photographs. I am mid-bite, eyes closed, hunched over in my bikini, with my forehead scrunched up and my mouth open wide. Just unabashedly enjoying the *heck* out of that massive sandwich, crumbs on my face and all. When I posted the photos on my Instagram feed later that day, I wrote a quick, off-the-cuff caption asking my followers, "Why don't we see more images of women actually eating food? Not looking perfect, not talking about how 'good' or 'bad' they are being, not commenting on or criticizing their bodies, but just eating and enjoying food?"

I never expected the reaction that the series of images—and those questions—would have. Almost immediately, comments began flooding in from people telling me how validating and liberating it was to see another woman eating—and enjoying—food without offering any explanation or apologizing for what she was eating. Many people commented on how "brave" I was for posting that photo and said they could "never in a million years" post an imperfect photo of themselves that showed their rolls, their cellulite, or food on their faces. Although I hadn't thought twice about posting the photos, there was a time not that long ago when I would have been mortified to do so. Publicly post a picture of myself with no makeup, hair haphazardly thrown into a messy ponytail, visible wrinkles and stomach rolls, AND food on my face?! I never thought that I would eventually get to the point where what I looked like wasn't a factor for me when sharing a public social media post.

But why was this photo so revolutionary? Why, when you search the Internet for the phrase "women eating food," do you get served dozens of stock images of thin, young, white women posing with a salad? Why, when you do the same search but replace *women* with *men*, do you see a whole bunch of images of men eating (actually *eating*) burgers, fries, and pizza? What does it say about our society that the media we consume—whether television, movies, advertisements, or social media feeds—is almost invariably filled with thin, young, white, conventionally attractive women who never seem to be eating anything? (Or, if they are eating, it's either a) something considered "healthy" or b) something considered "unhealthy" followed by the woman apologizing or explaining, "Oh, I don't usually eat like this.") Why were the photos of me with my Pub Sub applauded, whereas similar images of Brianna Campos, a licensed professional counselor from New Jersey who is fat,* eating and enjoying food, led to her receiving dozens of body-shaming, food-shaming, weight-shaming hate messages? "I got messages saying, 'No wonder you're fat,' 'Keep eating, piggy,' and telling me they hoped no young girls followed me because I am a bad influence—just for eating!" Brianna told me.[1]

Up until this point, I had never really questioned the photos I saw daily in the media (which also speaks to my privilege as a thin, young, white woman because I was mainly seeing images of people who looked just like me), but the implicit messages that these images send to women and girls were now staring me in the face: If you're going to take a photo of yourself with food, you must look pretty doing it, and you must be thin, or else you open yourself up to commentary on how "unhealthy" (or worse) you must be. Oh, and you can't actually be *eating* the food in the photos; you must only pose with it. These societal standards were what all the women who thought I was "brave" were reacting to; they couldn't imagine sharing a photo like this of themselves for fear of being judged, teased, shamed, or bullied. It's no wonder so many women can't eat and enjoy food without feeling guilty or needing to justify themselves and apologize.

I didn't know it at the time, but posting those images marked the start of both a personal and professional transformation for me. I began to sit with, digest, and reflect upon all of the questions that I posed earlier. At the time, I had been a dietitian for almost ten years; I had embarked on this career

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**Fat* is not inherently a bad word. I encourage you to read the description of the word *fat* in the "Defining Terminology" section later in this introduction.

path a decade earlier during my own disordered eating and struggles with body image. After spending most of my twenties improving my body image and my relationship to food and exercise, I had "accidentally" discovered intuitive eating a few years before my Instagram post with the Pub Sub. (I say "accidentally" because I thought I was taking a course on mindful eating, which, as you'll learn in this book, is *not* the same as intuitive eating.) That six-week course opened my eyes to a different way of approaching food, nutrition, health, and bodies. By the time I posted the images of me eating the sandwich, I had shifted my professional practice from focusing on weight loss to helping people take the emphasis *off* of weight to heal their relationship to food and their bodies.

Yet the reactions that people had to my post—and the digging that I started to do once I realized that a photo of a woman eating "real" food without explanation or apology was a big deal—caused me to begin questioning *everything*. I realized that the food and body image hang-ups that so many people face are actually symptoms of a much larger cultural problem. As I began thinking about the clients I had worked with over the years, I noticed patterns. Not only did many women feel like they needed to apologize, explain, or justify why they were eating certain foods, but this need to apologize or ask permission extended into many different aspects of their lives. I saw this pattern in my own life as well: I had spent my entire life following the "shoulds" that I had learned from society about what a woman should be and do, how she should act, and what she should look like—and apologizing when I felt like I wasn't living up to those societal expectations. From apologizing for my appearance ("I'm sorry I look awful; I didn't have time to do my makeup this morning" or "Ugh, ignore my outfit; I had planned to change"), my food choices ("I would get a salad, but I skipped breakfast, so I'm going to let myself get a burger instead" or "Oh, I know I'm being so bad, but I'm going to order dessert"), to work or personal life situations where I had clearly done nothing wrong ("Sorry I didn't respond to your text message right away" or "I'm sorry, can I add something here?"). I did it all of the time.

Food as an Entry Point to Exploration and Transformation

As I learned more about the roots of our culture's obsession with dieting and thin bodies—which I'll describe in Chapter 1—this pattern I saw in my clients (and myself) of food and body image struggles as a side effect of deeper societal issues made so much more sense. The impossible set of standards that women† are supposed to conform to have nothing to do with food, or weight, or body size. As I'll explain in this book, your struggles with food and your body have nothing to do with *you* and everything to do with the *society* that you have been raised in and now have to exist in. (This isn't to say that men aren't ever made to feel like they need to achieve certain body ideals; however, my goal in writing this book was to focus on those people who have been harmed the most by societal standards, which is primarily women.)

When I began working with clients years ago, I thought I was going to be focusing on people's relationship to food. But I quickly learned that food behaviors were the symptom—not the problem—and the relationship that really needed mending was the one people had with themselves. What presented as a problem with food or a problem with body image was more deeply rooted. The problems had nothing to do with them and everything to do with society. As my clients questioned their beliefs about food, dieting, and weight, they started to question all sorts of other thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. In the process of relearning to trust their bodies around food, I watched them start to trust themselves in many other areas of their lives.

It was then that I realized how food can be a powerful entry point into exploring more about ourselves, our beliefs, our values, and what we truly want out of life. As my friend Hana Jung, who I'll talk about later in the book, has said to me, "We are all going up the same mountain, just on different paths." This book is a compilation of the work that my clients and I have done over the years and our journey of unpacking and questioning everything we've been taught so that we can discover who we really are inside. I will break down the path that the clients I've worked with have traveled as they let go of dieting, made peace with food, and found their way back

†When I use the word *women* throughout the book, I'm speaking about all people who have been socialized as girls and women, including cisgender women, transgender women, feminized bodies, and gender nonconforming bodies.

to their bodies, their intuition, and themselves. And I'll show you how you can embark, or move further along, on your own path toward self-discovery and transformation. This book is about food and eating, yes, but really it is a book about unlearning, questioning everything, relearning, and—ultimately—transforming your life.

Every single thing you think you "know"—about food, appearance, body size, and more—was something you were taught at some point. This book will help you begin the process of *unlearning*. You will uncover the historical and personal origins of your beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to food, weight, health, appearance, and other social and cultural norms. Your relationship to food is the starting point, but the real work becomes figuring out how the world has adversely affected your life and your perception of yourself. You will strip away all of the things that have been imposed upon you by society so you can find *yourself* again. Throughout this book, I'll also share how you can relearn to heal and change your perception to build back trust with your body and step into your full, authentic power.

From Unapologetic Eating to Unapologetic Living

When I began writing this book, I had no idea what title I was going to give it. But the more I wrote, the more I realized the underlying theme that was emerging. When it comes to food, body size, setting boundaries, work decisions, or life choices, I want you to be able to do what you want *without* asking permission or needing to justify, explain, or apologize. *Unapologetic eating* means eating what you want, when you want, and how you want without feeling guilty or ashamed. It is that photo of me with the sandwich: not perfect, a little messy, food on your face, clearly enjoying yourself, and fully inhabiting your body. It is the audible *mmmm* you let out when you eat something *really* good. It is being in the moment with what you are eating, and what you are doing, without feeling self-conscious or worrying about what others may be thinking. Unapologetic eating is about getting back to your roots and to who you were before society told you who you should be.

In this book, I'll walk you through the process going from trying to "fix"[‡] or change yourself to *unapologetic eating* and finally to *unapologetic living*.

I've broken down this process in four segments: fixing, allowing, feeling, and growing. In Part 1, "Fixing," you'll learn about the history of diet culture and our culture's beauty ideals. I'll also explain the real reasons why dieting and weight-control measures never seem to work and share more about why health and weight are not as inextricably linked as we've been led to believe. In this section, you'll spend some time digging deeper into your history with food and your body, including reflecting on where your food and body beliefs came from and how they have affected your life.

Part 2, "Allowing," is where you can begin to take steps to move away from dieting, sit with the thoughts and feelings that this brings up, and start to rediscover (and trust) your inner wisdom. I'll walk you through the first of two essential skills necessary for the process of unlearning: mindfulness. I recommend taking time and practicing—not just reading—the different mindfulness exercises because you will continue to return to these skills throughout the rest of the book. In this part, you will also learn more about the intuitive eating framework and several foundation elements that need to be in place as you start practicing connecting to your body and eating unapologetically.

From there, you will move on to Part 3, "Feeling." When you stop trying to "fix" yourself and begin to allow your body to just "be," many thoughts and feelings can bubble up to the surface (often ones that you may have spent years—or decades—trying to suppress). In this part, I will guide you through the process of sitting with the feelings and discomfort that can arise in this journey. You'll come up with a self-care plan and learn how to use a second essential skill in this process: self-compassion. I will also share how you can practice respecting your body by listening to it, being kind to it, and expressing appreciation for it. In addition, you will begin working through the body image healing process.

The last section is Part 4, "Growing." In the process of unlearning, you get to explore, learn, and define new truths for yourself. In the final chapters of the book, you will have the chance to do some deep self-exploration and self-discovery, learn how to become more connected to your body, and find ways to embrace your power more fully. You'll also learn how you can challenge all of the things you think you are "supposed to" do, be, act, or look like and figure out what it is that *you* really want instead.

‡I put the word *fix* in quotation marks throughout the book because, as you'll learn, you are not broken, and the problem is not with you.

I hope that you do more than just read this book and really put what you're learning into practice. To help you do that, I've included a variety of breakout boxes with reflection questions, prompts, and other helpful exercises. I encourage you to take some time with these reflections and have a journal or something else on hand to write down your thoughts, feelings, and memories; doing so will help you get the most benefit possible out of this book. Try to complete the reflection questions in writing and practice the techniques that I reference in the chapters. I wrote this book to be both educational *and* practical so that you understand the concepts intellectually but also integrate them into your day-to-day life.

Sitting with Discomfort

Many of the things that you read in this book may make you uncomfortable, unsettled, defensive, or even outright angry. Over the years, I have learned that discomfort and defensiveness serve to alert me that there is something deeper to unpack and explore. The moments in which I've felt the most uncomfortable or defensive are the times in which I have grown and evolved the most. I hope that you can notice any discomfort that arises throughout this book and use that as an invitation to sit back and be open to what comes up for you. As Sassy Latte (@sassy_latte), a political creative whose work constantly challenges me to think critically, says, "Finding out that you were wrong, mistaken, or ignorant aren't attacks on your character. These discoveries are chances to course correct values, beliefs, and behaviors."[2] Unlearning and confronting your biases comes with discomfort, but it is within this process that you can grow, evolve, and rediscover who *you* really are.

In this book, I talk about the various systems of oppression that exist in our society. When groups of people are oppressed—for example, fat people and Black[Ω] communities—people who are not in those groups hold privilege that does not force them to experience oppression based on the size of their body or their skin tone. The word *privilege* can make some people bristle, so I want to explain that I'm talking about privileges at the *societal* level rather than on a *personal* level. The privileges that you may hold have nothing to

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[Ω] I capitalize the B in Black to recognize the ethnic identity of Black folks in the United States. Read more in the "Defining Terminology" section

do with how *you* feel about yourself but about how *society* treats you. That means, for example, that a person can have thin privilege and still struggle with their body image. Just because a person has size privilege or white privilege doesn't mean they haven't suffered; it means that they haven't suffered *because of* the size of their body or the color of their skin. As I'll discuss later in the book, oppression is used as a tool (both overtly and covertly) by the people and/or groups in power to marginalize people across various intersections of identities, including gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, immigration status, and much, much more.

Try to be gentle with yourself and show yourself compassion as you read, learn, explore, and practice the concepts from this book. This process of moving from dieting to unapologetic eating and unapologetic living is a continuous, ever-evolving journey. Allow yourself permission to not know everything, to be uncomfortable, to get it wrong, to make mistakes, to not be "perfect." By doing so, you'll then have more space to learn and grow. You may find it helpful to read this book in starts and stops to give yourself time to digest, think, reflect, and practice the tools and concepts you are learning. The intention for this journey is not "read, learn, and then do it perfectly." In fact, it's pretty much the opposite. Perfectionism, as I'll share more about, doesn't allow you any space to learn and grow, so I want you to commit to showing up, trying new things, experimenting, and making mistakes because that's the process in which learning and growth occur.

In the spirit of constant learning and growth, I want to acknowledge something: This book is not perfect. When I read the published version months from now, I know that I will notice all sorts of things that I would have done differently had I known what I have learned by that point. But that's the thing: It could never be perfect, and perfection should never be our goal (which I have continued to remind myself as I've been writing this book). I—just like everyone else—am constantly unlearning and relearning, continuing to make mistakes, and (with the help of the phenomenal equity consultants McKensie Mack and Lindley Ashline) naming and uncovering my implicit biases. The goal is not perfection; the goal is to show up, put yourself out there, and then, when you get it wrong and are corrected, learn better and do better the next time. It's a constant evolution of unlearning and relearning, unlearning and relearning—and being open and committing to doing so. I'm committing to this right alongside you.

One final (but very important) note: Although I have struggled with my relationship to food and my body, I hold a lot of privilege that has made this journey much easier for me than for others. As a white, thin, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, middle-class woman who grew up in a small, primarily white town in Connecticut, my lived experiences are but a small and limited view of the overall human experience (as shown in the very different reactions to thin and fat body sizes showing up online that I shared earlier). Disordered eating, disconnected eating, eating disorders, and body image struggles show up differently in people of different identities and lived experiences. Throughout the book, I've done my best to identify my privilege and tell stories using a variety of clients whose identities are different than mine in the hope that you will be able to see yourself and relate to them. You're also going to see me quoting and citing Black and Brown women of color, fat women, and genderqueer people because they have been at the forefront of the body liberation movement for decades, and it's with them that so much wisdom lies. They paved the way for us to learn how to let go of dieting and embrace our bodies as a form of courageous resistance, self-love, and collective care, and I thank them for their labor.

No matter who you are or what identities you hold, I wrote this book intending to encourage more people to think outside of the arbitrary boxes that society has put us in. To make peace with food, feel at home in your body, understand your inherent worth, and move closer to unapologetically eating *and* living. Because true freedom and liberation come from rejecting all the instances of "I should" and "I'm supposed to" to find—and trust—who you really are deep inside.

Defining Terminology

Before you go any further, I want to pause to define some terminology that I use throughout this book because some words and concepts may be new to you. Where I use those terms, I have attempted to include them alongside examples, descriptions, and stories, but I have also defined them here. I encourage you to read through these definitions and come back to them as needed while you are reading the book.

- **anti-Blackness:** According to Charlene A. Carruthers, anti-Blackness is "a system of beliefs and practices that destroy, erode, and dictate the humanity of Black people."[3] It is a form of racism that specially targets Black people.
- **BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color):** A more inclusive and specific term than "people of color," the addition of Black and Indigenous helps to "account for the erasure of Black people with darker skin and Native American people," according to Cynthia Frisby, a professor at the Missouri School of Journalism at the University of Missouri.[4] Throughout the book I use the term "BIPOC people," even though the word "people" is already in the acronym, to make it clear that I am talking about groups of people.
- **Black:** I capitalize the B in Black to recognize the ethnic identity of Black folks in the United States. As Alexandria Neason of the Columbia Journalism Review writes, "I view the term Black as both a recognition of an ethnic identity in the States that doesn't rely on hyphenated Americanness (and is more accurate than African American, which suggests recent ties to the continent) and is also transnational and inclusive of our Caribbean [and] Central/South American siblings."[5] The Associated Press style guidelines were updated in June 2020 to include capitalizing the word Black when used to describe a person's or people's race or ethnicity; the w in white is not capitalized, in part because white people are not discriminated against because of their skin color and to avoid legitimizing white supremacist beliefs.
- **capitalism:** An economic system in which private individuals and corporations control the production of and access to goods and services. The profits that come from the production of the goods and services are also controlled by private companies, instead of by the people who

provide labor to the companies. A focus is typically placed on economic growth, profits, private property, and limited government intervention over social issues like access to safe housing, income equality, healthcare, and education.

- **cisgender:** When a person's gender identity (that is, how someone experiences their own gender—i.e., as male, female, both, in between, or neither) matches their sex that was assigned to them at birth.
- **Eurocentric** (**or Eurocentrism**)**:** Centered around or specifically highlighting European culture and Western civilization. Often this means favoring Western civilizations over non-Western ones.
- **fat:** A word used to describe a person's body size. Despite the negative connotations that society has assigned to it, *fat* is not inherently a "bad" word. Many people within the fat acceptance and body positivity communities use the word *fat* as a neutral adjective to describe their body size (similar to descriptors like short or tall). As Stephanie Yeboah writes in her book *Fattily Ever After*, "We deserve to re-claim the very word used to harass and hurt us."[7] Due to the negative associations that society has linked to the word *fat* and the baggage that may come with it, not everyone may feel ready to use it to describe themselves. We never want to assume how someone identifies or put a label on them. That said, I have chosen to use the word *fat* throughout the book as a neutral descriptor of body size in solidarity with the fat acceptance movement, in an effort to destigmatize the word, and because size oppression is a real thing, and we need to be able to describe the groups of people who experience size oppression if we hope to eliminate it.

  There is no fixed or consistent meaning to what constitutes a "fat person," and it can represent a wide range of body sizes. Some people consider "fat" to be apply to any person with a body mass index (BMI) above "normal" (i.e., people with "overweight" or "obese" BMIs). Others consider "fat" to apply at the point where body size begins to significantly limit access to seating, public infrastructure like plane seats and turnstiles, and high-quality healthcare. Still others consider "fat" to be when a person wears plus-sized clothing, which can vary depending on clothing retailers, but in the United States is considered a size 14 to 28 (above a size 28 is usually referred to as "extended plus size").
- **fatphobia** (**also includes anti-fat beliefs**)**:** The fear of and/or hatred of fat bodies. Can include a fear of becoming fat or fear of being fat.

- **healthism:** When health and disease are positioned as an individual person's problem and as something they must be obligated to "fix." With healthism, "health" becomes solely about one's personal practices without acknowledgment of the very real systemic and structural barriers that can impede health and well-being. Healthism's version of health does not incorporate any of the myriad social factors that, as you'll soon learn, have a much larger impact on the health of both the individual and the population as a whole. Healthism also assumes that all people want to or should pursue health; it makes health an obligation rather than a personal decision.
- **healthy/healthier:** Throughout the book, I often put these words in quotation marks to signify how the words are complicated, subjective, and often problematic. Our culture has assigned moral implications to these words. In our society, *healthy* tends to be thought of as *good*, whereas *unhealthy* tends to equal *bad.* (For this reason, I put *unhealthy* in quotation marks throughout the book, too.) Throughout the book, I talk more about how these connotations can have a harmful impact on our relationship to food.
- **homophobia:** Fear of, hatred of, and/or discrimination against people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual. There are also people who use the term *queerphobia,* which can mean the fear of, hatred of, and/or discrimination against anyone who doesn't identify as heterosexual or cisgender and includes homophobia, biphobia (fear of, hatred of, and/or discrimination against people who are bisexual), transphobia (fear of, hatred of, and/or discrimination against people who are transgender), and more.
- **inclusive/inclusivity:** Being inclusive means honoring people's lived experiences and realities, even if they (or especially if they) differ from your experience or your reality.
- **intersectionality:** A term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw to describe the ways in which people with varying identities encounter the world.[8] Everybody holds various identities that intersect with one another, including their race, class, gender, physical ability, sexuality, age, nationality, religion, body size, socioeconomic status, and more. Intersectionality explains how the combination of several different identities will affect a person more than if they were living with just one at a time.

- **marginalized people:** Those people or groups of people who are relegated to the outskirts of society by systems of power and the people who hold power in a society. Marginalization involves confining a group of people to a less-important, less-powerful position in society. I also use the term "marginalized body" or "marginalized bodies"; by doing so I am not objectifying the person, but speaking to the ways in which systemic injustice specifically attacks (and marginalizes) certain bodies.
- **obesity and overweight:** While these words are commonly used to describe larger bodies, they have been developed and co-opted by the medical community to medicalize and pathologize a person's body (which means "to represent something as a disease" or treat someone as if they are "abnormal"). These words themselves are fatphobic and stigmatizing. *Overweight* is a word that assumes that there is a "correct" weight that a body should be and that if you are "over" that weight, then you are abnormal or different. The word *overweight* is rooted in the BMI charts, a problematic and flawed measure that assumes health is based on size (which, as I explain in the book, is not the case). Meanwhile the word *obese* comes from the Latin word *obesus*, meaning "having eaten until fat." The term assigns illness based on size, not on any other parameter, and places blame on the individual, which is not only incorrect but is stigmatizing. For this reason, naming people as "overweight" or "obese" isn't just talking about their body mass; it is by definition designating them as "atypical" or "unnatural," which further marginalizes a person to the outskirts of society. This is why I do not use those terms to describe people and why, when I do reference them, I put them in quotation marks to signify that I don't recognize them as official terms or agree with what they usually signify.
- **oppression:** When individuals or groups of people are subject to social, economic, and political burdens and perpetual disenfranchisement because they belong to a certain social group (because of their gender, race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, and more). In the textbook *Introduction to Community Psychology*, the authors state, "Typically, a government or political organization that is in power places these restrictions formally or covertly on groups so that the distribution of resources is unfairly allocated—and this means power stays in the hands of those who already have it... We can conclude

that oppression is the social act of placing severe restrictions on an individual, group, or institution."[9] Oppression is a tool that is used to marginalize people across various intersections of identity.

- **patriarchy:** Refers to a social system where men hold most of the power, authority, and control in society.
- **privilege:** Refers to the social, economic, and political advantages or rights that the dominant group of people hold based upon their gender, race, sexual orientation, social class, etc.
- **racism:** The prejudice against, and the oppression and/or marginalization of, BIPOC people based upon the socially constructed racial hierarchy that privileges white people. Systemic racism includes the social systems, structures, and institutions in power that cause disparities in access to resources and opportunities for BIPOC people.
- **relationship to food**: How you regard food and behave toward it. A positive or "healthy" relationship to food can mean regarding all foods as neutral, allowing yourself to eat the foods you enjoy (and then move on), and trusting your body to tell you what and how much it needs. Many people have a damaged or disordered relationship to food, which may include behaviors like dieting, restricting, and bingeing; preoccupation with food; rigid behaviors or rituals around food; oppressive feelings of guilt and shame associated with eating; and/or feeling out of control around food. When we can shift how we regard and behave toward food, we can improve our relationship to food and find freedom and liberation.
- **sizeism:** The prejudice and discrimination against, and the oppression and/or marginalization of, people based on their body size. Most often is directed toward people who are fat. Closely linked to weight stigma.
- **thin:** There is no fixed or consistent meaning as to what constitutes "thin"; however, it is often used to describe anyone who fits into "straight-sized" clothing which is a U.S. size 12 and smaller (that is how I use it in this book as well). Although you may not feel thin (which speaks more to our screwed up society standards than your body), if you can buy clothing directly off the rack from any store, you are straight-sized and therefore benefit from certain social privileges.

Although body image issues impact people of all sizes, thin/straight-sized folks are not the targets of structural or institutional sizeism (i.e., you're not assumed to be "unhealthy" just because of your size, you

can go to the doctor without having weight loss recommended as a fix for everything, and your health insurance rates aren't higher because of your body size).

- **transgender** (**also abbreviated as trans**)**:** A term that describes people whose gender identity and/or gender expression is different than the sex they were assigned at birth. Gender identity is a spectrum with many identities between the cisgender and transgender identities.
- **weight-centric or weight-normative:** An approach to health and well-being that views body weight as a determinant of health and emphasizes weight management (i.e., weight loss and the maintenance of a "normal" body mass index) when promoting health and well-being. In a weight-centric approach, a person who goes to the doctor for any type of medical issue is usually evaluated first based on their weight, regardless of whether their weight is relevant to what they are presenting with. A weight-centric or weight-normative approach assumes that weight and disease are related in a linear fashion and places an emphasis on "personal responsibility" for diet-, exercise-, and other health-related choices and outcomes (i.e., healthism). In this approach, a "normal" body mass index is conflated with health, whereas an "overweight" or "obese" body mass index is conflated with disease.
- **weight-inclusive:** An approach to health and well-being that does not focus on weight or weight reduction as a prerequisite for or measure of health and instead views health and well-being as multifaceted. Specific weights and body mass indexes are not idealized or pathologized. A weight-inclusive approach acknowledges that weight is not a behavior, but rather an outcome over which a person has very little control. This approach seeks to provide nonstigmatizing care and holds that everybody is capable of pursuing health and well-being independent of weight. The focus is taken off of weight and put upon modifiable lifestyle behaviors and the social determinants of health, including improving access to healthcare and reducing weight stigma.
- **weight stigma:** The negative attitudes and beliefs about fat folks and the assumptions made based upon their body size. It is a form of discrimination and oppression toward fat people in which they face daily barriers in society that thin people do not. This may include fewer job opportunities, lower pay, less respect, fewer clothing options, and more. Closely linked to fatphobia. Also known as sizeism.

PART 1

Fixing

CHAPTER 1

It's Not About the Food

What would our lives—and our world—look like if everyone could feel worthy in their bodies? If we could live our lives outside of the constraints of who we are told we *should* be or what we are *perceived* to be, and just be who we are? If, instead of having others trying to control our bodies, and us, we could be able to be guided by our internal wisdom? What if we could eat, and live, on our terms, without apologizing or offering explanation?

Every day I hear from women who tell me that they can't stop thinking about food or worrying about their bodies. They spend so much time thinking about what they're eating, what they're going to eat, and how much of it they're going to have. Every day is judged as "good" or "bad" based on what they ate (or didn't eat) and often by the number they see on the scale. As one client said to me, "My first thought when I wake up in the morning and my last thought before I go to bed is 'What did I eat?! Ugh, I'm so bad.'"

These women appear to have everything "together" in every other aspect of their lives. But under the surface, there is a recurring theme: Thoughts of food and what their bodies look like take up *so much* of their brain space that there's little room for anything else. Yet when we take a step back, food is just the tip of the iceberg. What presents as a problem related to food is, in reality, much deeper and more complex. Our screwed up, oppressive relationship to food is a symptom of the problem, not the cause. Body image struggles are not a personal flaw; they're a symptom of a bigger, more complex system that has been in place for centuries.

Western culture is hostile to women's bodies (the same can be said for many cultures around the world). From a very young age, we are taught—either directly or indirectly—that the value we have in the world is closely linked to our appearance and to other people's evaluation of our appearance. We are taught to diet and shrink ourselves to assimilate and be accepted. So many of us do. We spend a huge portion of our time, money, and energy attempting to "fix" ourselves to fit into the status quo. And no wonder: We live in a culture that venerates thinness. Our society places a premium on bodies that are thin, young, white, heterosexual, cisgender (meaning one's gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth), able-bodied, and conventionally attractive. To be anything else is to risk very real threats to your physical, psychological, and emotional health (though not necessarily for the reasons you may think).

We've been taught that women are supposed to look, act, and live a certain way. This indoctrination keeps us caged. Dieting and being made to feel shame about our bodies hold us back from fully living our lives because they keep us stifled, distracted, and dissatisfied, not to mention hungry. Dieting dampens our personalities, our relationships, our creativity, our joy, and our life experiences. It costs us time with friends and family, blunts connection to ourselves and to others, and affects our ability to work, lead, and parent.

This loss begins early. According to data from the National Institute on Media and Family, girls begin giving up activities because they don't like how they look as early as age ten.[1] More than 50 percent of thirteen-year-old American girls are unhappy with their bodies; that number grows to 80 percent by age seventeen and remains that high throughout adulthood.[2] So if you thought you were alone with your food and body image struggles, you most certainly are not.

Think of all the missed opportunities that come from waiting until you get to your "goal" weight or waiting until you feel happy about your body before you're willing to do certain things. I've seen women put off traveling, dating, switching careers, applying for promotions, and having children—all because they felt like they needed to lose weight first. It's really hard to be your full, authentic, empowered, unapologetic self when you are trying to live up to the ideals that society puts on women. As I will explain, society's unrealistic expectations are by design.

The good news is you can take an alternative path that doesn't involve dieting, self-loathing, or self-control. When you stop pursuing weight loss and cease numbing yourself with dieting, you can begin to transform your life. As you stop trying to control your body and give up attempting to fit yourself into the box (and body) that our dominant white, Eurocentric society deems "acceptable," you can turn inward toward the wisdom deep inside of you. You can begin to celebrate who you are instead of apologizing for what you are not. As you learn to trust your body with food, this trust transfers to other areas of your life. And thus begins the process of unlocking your true self and the ability to live your most authentic, meaningful, liberated life. But first, let's explore how the heck we got to this place.

Dieting as a Controlling Force

A cultural focus on body size and appearance (and therefore dieting) teaches us to deny what we truly want in favor of something that someone else says we should have or should be. We are taught to ignore our body's signals, and our body's wants and needs, in pursuit of a rigid, narrow definition of beauty and health. Dieting is controlling and oppressive by nature and also by design.

Western culture equates thinness to health, happiness, attractiveness, and worthiness, a system of beliefs that is often referred to as *diet culture*. In our society, to be thin is to be morally superior, whereas to be fat is to be unhealthy, lazy, and a failure. We are taught from a very young age that body size and the foods that someone chooses to eat reflect their worth as a person. Eating "bad" or "unhealthy" foods makes you a bad person, whereas eating "good" foods and trying to diet down to a smaller size is seen as virtuous. In this way, our culture promotes dieting and weight loss as a way to achieve a higher status in society. People are told that they have to eat a certain way and be a certain size to be "healthy." Therefore, certain foods and certain body types are inherently elevated while others are vilified. These cultural beliefs about body size and morality, worthiness, and even health didn't come out of nowhere. They were specifically created to establish social hierarchies.

The Colonialist Roots of Diet Culture

Diet culture, and the belief system that equates *thin* to *good* and *fat* to *bad,* may seem like a new phenomenon, but it has existed for centuries. For much of history, humans' main concern was getting enough food. For centuries, fat, round bodies were deemed beautiful, healthy, and desirable (though you can find examples of fatphobia—a fear of fatness—as far back as Ancient Greece and Rome).[3] The more modern origins of the diet culture we know today are rooted in colonialism, racism, classism, and sexism. That might sound far-fetched, but stick with me—I promise you it's not.

Our culture was built upon the control of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, which allowed white people to rise to the top and hold the power. To establish social hierarchies where white people (especially white men) could remain at the top, white Europeans and Americans linked being Black and/or being fat to negative traits like greediness and laziness. As Sabrina Strings, author of *Fearing the Black Body,* explains, "Two critical historical developments contributed to a fetish for svelteness and a phobia about fatness: the rise of the transatlantic slave trade and the spread of Protestantism. Racial scientific rhetoric about slavery linked fatness to 'greedy' Africans and religious discourse suggested that overeating was ungodly...In the United States, fatness became stigmatized as both black and sinful. Slenderness served as a marker of moral, racial and national superiority."[4] White men effectively created a societal "other"—marginalizing Black people and, in their efforts to do so, relegating fatness as something to fear and avoid. This fatphobia, rather than any concern of health or well-being, is what began our culture's fixation on weight. As I'll talk more about in Chapter 3, the link between health and weight was established as a result of fatphobia—not the other way around.

In the United States, food and body size have always been closely tied to morality. This association is due in large part to religious rhetoric that held pleasure as sinful and believed that denying the body's appetites was a way for a person to get closer to God. From that concept came the idea that "overeating" or eating "bad" foods signified a "bad" or "immoral" person. This idea that anything "impure" must be avoided explains almost all popular diets. It also explains the common stereotypes that exist about fat people: that they are lazy, uneducated, and lack willpower. These negative terms—linked directly to body size—denote immorality.

The Sexist Roots of Diet Culture

In addition to colonialism and racism, diet culture also has its roots in sexism and the desire for female obedience. We live in a patriarchal society, a social system in which men hold the majority of the power and have historically dominated leadership roles at every level of society. So, who benefits from women being preoccupied by dieting and conforming to body ideals? Men (white men in particular).

When we examine history, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, each time women gained more power and advancement, society responded with the creation of more and more beauty and body ideals. As Naomi Wolf describes in her book *The Beauty Myth,* "A cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience...Dieting is the most potent political sedative in women's history; a quietly mad population is a tractable one."[5] Obsessing over weight, size, and appearance is not only harmful physically and mentally (as you'll see in Chapter 2), but it holds women back in society. Once again, society's emphasis on thinness is not about women's health or well-being but about their submission.

Creating a culture that elevates thinness and demonizes fat bodies serves as an oppressive force to keep women and BIPOC people down and white men and their institutions in power. (Note: This isn't to say that men are not affected by diet culture but, by and large, people who have been socialized as women, including cisgender women, transgender women, and people in feminized and/or gender nonconforming bodies, have historically been the prime targets.) Those in power have, over time, conditioned society as a whole to believe that certain groups can't be trusted. Our culture teaches us that our bodies aren't to be trusted, which we then internalize as the message that we can't trust ourselves.

When we don't trust ourselves, we are more apt to look to others to measure how we are "doing." When it comes to food and body size, this lack of trust often shows up in the form of frequent weighing (to make sure we are staying "on track") or counting calories (to make sure we are staying "in control"). But this also shows up in many other facets of our lives. Whenever we look for external approval rather than relying on internal body signals and self-trust, others can then define us. When you don't trust yourself, it becomes easy to be influenced by societal expectations versus pursuing

what you really want. In this way, diet culture—and therefore dieting—serves as a way to control people. When you are concerned with fulfilling a societal "ideal" of thinness, you are distracted from fully living your life and are not able to step into your full power. Dieting distracts people from doing other, more important, things, which is exactly what those in power want.

To be clear, I do not say this to shame anyone who attempts to conform to these societal body ideals. Very real oppression exists for people who hold marginalized identities, and it's understandable that someone would want to protect themselves from this injustice. The blame does not rest on the individual but on the societal systems and structures put in place to make things convenient for men while subjugating women, fat people, BIPOC people, and queer people. We've all been existing in these systems since day one, so it makes sense that we would participate in working to achieve these ideals. But these are the same systems that disconnect us from our bodies and ourselves and teach us to deny what our bodies want and need in favor of what society deems "acceptable." To move forward, we must become critical consumers and objectively assess all of the systems in which we take part.

Reflection Questions

What has dieting or your pursuit of weight loss gotten in the way of?

What is it costing you not to improve your relationship to food and your body?

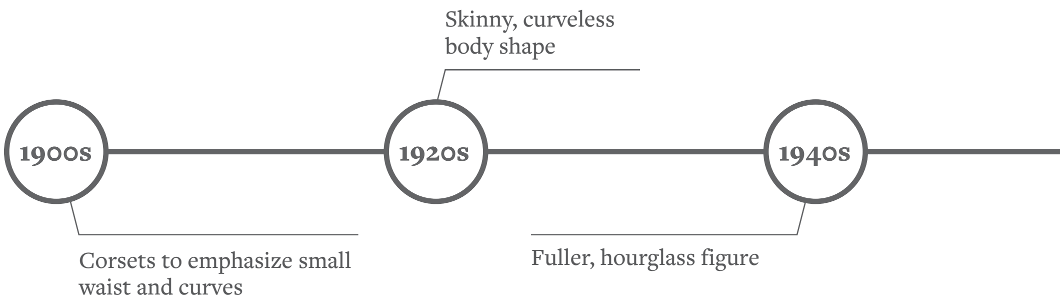
What would you do if you weren't spending as much time thinking about food or your body?

The History of Beauty Ideals

Thinness is just one social beauty standard that we have been indoctrinated to believe we must adhere to. In addition to body size, there are dozens of other beauty ideals in our culture—most often directed at women. These standards of beauty are anything but accidental. The beauty ideal is the socially constructed idea that a woman's appearance, "prettiness," and desirability are her most important traits. Society rewards those who work to achieve, maintain, and adhere to the "ideal," a practice that takes a good deal of time, money, and energy. Convincing women that they must pursue certain beauty ideals also serves as a distraction. When women are busy trying to achieve these "ideals," they are less likely to have time to pursue liberation, equality, and power.

What was thought of as "beautiful" used to vary considerably between cultures, but as Western beauty (and body) ideals overtake more of the world, we are unfortunately seeing more cultures conform to these ideals. History shows us that beauty ideals (including body size) are in constant flux. In Western society, women's "ideal" body has shifted every decade or so throughout the twentieth century. Again, this is by design.

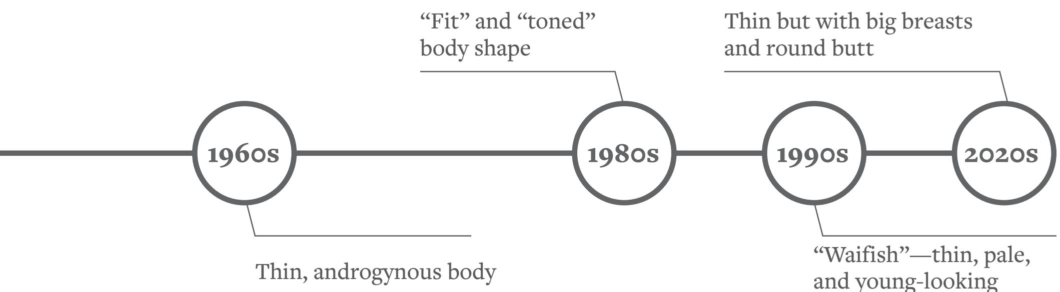
Before the twentieth century, the "ideal" woman's body in white American culture was typically voluptuous, with full breasts, hips, and a soft belly. In the early 1900s, women wore corsets to emphasize their waist and curves. During the tail end of the first wave of popular U.S. feminism in the 1920s, which was primarily centered upon white women, a skinny, curveless body shape came into fashion as women took to binding their chests and wearing straight, flapper-style dresses to de-emphasize their curves. In the 1940s and '50s, a fuller body type returned, as the "glamorous



housewife" with an hourglass figure became popular. The second wave of feminism in the 1960s and '70s brought back the thin, androgynous body as a beauty ideal. In the 1980s, we saw the rise of "fit" and "toned" bodies, à la Jane Fonda and Jazzercise. The ideal was still slim but now strong as well. The 1990s saw a reemergence of the "waif" look, with an uptick in white models who were thin, pale, and young-looking. Big breasts also began to be fashionable, and plastic surgery for breast augmentation became popular.

The beauty ideal today is similar to the 1990s, but it's become even *more* unattainable, and in some cases literally impossible, given the prolific use of minimally invasive surgery, Photoshop, and filters. The "ideal" woman's body in the U.S. as of 2020 is thin, with a small waist, muscle definition, and a thigh gap but also with big breasts and a large round butt.

Because most women don't naturally fit that description, products like shapewear—those tight undergarments that make a body look smooth under clothing—were created to make a woman look "better" by getting closer to the standard of beauty. The explicit purpose is to "smooth" the body and therefore make it look more "acceptable" by society's standards. Although it's understandable if you think you look "better" in shapewear, often when you feel as though you "have" to look a certain way, it's due to conditioning from being *taught* that this way looks better. That's not to say that you're wrong for wearing it or that you have to give it up. There are folks who understand the history of shapewear and still wear it because they like it and enjoy how it looks. But, as I'll discuss more shortly, thinking critically about what prompts us to use shapewear (and to try to meet other beauty ideals) then makes us more aware of our motives for using it and, in the end, everyone is able to make the choice that feels best for them.



Eurocentrism and Whiteness

Something important to note about all of the beauty standards that I just described is that they are overwhelmingly Eurocentric. The default concept of "beautiful" aligns to the white person's features. So while beauty ideals are harmful to all women, women of color carry a much larger burden. Achieving greater proximity to whiteness means becoming more valuable to society and can function to improve one's social status. Society is full of subtle and not-so-subtle messages telling women of color that the more white they look, the better. As activist Sonya Renee Taylor writes in her book *The Body Is Not an Apology,* "In Western societies hair is often tied to notions of femininity, beauty, and gender...Hair should have a certain texture, should be a certain color. For Americans, the rules for hair (like most of our body rules) come with a default aesthetic: long, straight, fine...and, if possible, blonde...Short, dark, kinky hair...would never be the default and by extension never be normal. In our society, normal is the pathway to worthy and beautiful."[6] Just as we see with body and weight ideals, beauty ideals were shaped against a racist (classist, sexist, ableist) backdrop.

Ageism

Several years ago, when I first started noticing deepening wrinkles on my forehead and around my eyes, I panicked. I bought all sorts of antiaging creams and researched the cost of Botox. As soon as I noticed gray hairs, I immediately started plucking them. I was terrified of getting older and was ashamed and embarrassed of my aging face and body for giving me away. And it's no wonder. In our culture, youth is prized, and this value is reflected in the standard beauty ideals. Also, women are taught that our most highly valued social asset is our looks, so it's not surprising that so many of us are afraid to age.

The message of youth being better is conveyed in ways both subtle and not so subtle. Women who age "well" or "gracefully" (i.e., who still look young) are celebrated. In an era where injectables like Botox and fillers are marketed to younger and younger women and retouching a photo is as simple as downloading an app, the smooth, ageless face is ubiquitous. This is reflected in the media, where we rarely see women over the age of 35. (The

same can't be said for older men, who show up in the media at least ten times more frequently than older women.) When a woman inevitably does age, her visibility and value plummets. No wonder women are terrified of any sign of aging and try to do whatever they can to "fix" it.

Our fear of aging—and our worship of youth—is handed down to us via capitalism and the patriarchy. A capitalistic society needs labor and productivity to increase profits. Young people have more ability to be productive and more labor-generating years in them, so they are valued more than older adults. Also, with age comes power. As Kelly Diels, an educator, writer, and coach, shared with me, "Wrinkles and gray hair are a function of age, and with age comes wisdom. That's why women aren't allowed to show age—because it telegraphs internal power."[7] Power, in our male-dominated culture, isn't meant to be wielded by women. Whenever a woman has something that conveys power, including signs of aging, society often tells her she should be ashamed of it and try to cover it or keep it hidden. In the end, "men don't age better than women, they're just allowed to age."[8]

Are They Really "Flaws"?

Similar to my experience with my first wrinkles and gray hairs, when I began to notice cellulite on my legs I immediately tried to find a "fix." I thought cellulite made me look unattractive, and I spent years (and lots of money) on creams and lotions to try to make it go away. Never for a minute did I stop and think about *why* I believed that cellulite, wrinkles, and gray hair were not attractive. If I had, I would have realized that I had learned these beliefs rather than being born with them.

Many of the things that we consider "flaws" today were not actually seen as such until society—and then advertisers—made them out to be. As Jes Baker says in her book, *Things No One Will Tell Fat Girls*, "You hate your body because Don Draper told you to."[9] Although it's not quite as simple as that, private corporations do set out to make us feel insecure so that beauty product manufacturers can sell us a "cure" (and make money). Let's look deeper at a few of these so called "flaws."

Body Hair

Although it is now a societal norm for women to shave their armpits (or else risk being labeled "gross"), women never thought to do so until the early 1900s when sleeveless dresses became en vogue, and a company that sold men's hair removal products decided to target women. They launched a multiyear ad campaign geared toward selling hair-removal cream to women by convincing them that smooth underarms were the latest must-have beauty trend. In the advertisements, underarm hair was called "embarrassing," "unsightly," and "unclean." Meanwhile, the ads suggested that women with hairless underarms were "refined," "dainty," and "perfectly groomed."

This hairless ideal soon extended to women's legs as well. Up until the 1930s, most women didn't shave their legs because they typically wore pantyhose. But during World War I, when silk and nylon manufacturing was forced to slow down, more and more women began to remove their leg hair. Advertisers jumped on board, positioning smooth, hairless legs as the epitome of womanhood. Fast-forward eighty years and most women today consider hair removal a necessary evil. Almost all the women I know wouldn't dream of putting on shorts or a skirt without first shaving their legs; the same goes for a bathing suit and their bikini lines or a tank top with their underarms. It's a beauty ideal so ingrained in our society that it's hard to imagine a time when it wasn't the case.

Cellulite

Biologically, cellulite occurs naturally for 80 to 90 percent of women. That's right: Basically, *all of us* have it, no matter our body size. The dimples and bumps are a result of natural subcutaneous fat poking through connective tissue (men's cellular structure is slightly different, which is why it's not as prevalent on their skin). Cellulite doesn't discriminate between body sizes or types—women big and small get cellulite—and it's not harmful to your health. Nowadays, it's thought of as an unsightly skin condition to be fixed, but before the 1960s and '70s, it was just considered normal skin. Then in the late 1960s, the term *cellulite* was first referenced in *Vogue* magazine, introducing its readers to the word and creating yet another beauty standard to try to achieve. Once cellulite was seen as a "problem" to be fixed, skin care companies began creating cellulite-elimination products to profit off another beauty ideal.

Gray Hair

In Western cultures, gray hair signifies a loss of youth. And with beauty ideals being firmly planted in "youthfulness," anything that signifies old age becomes taboo—at least for women. As with most beauty ideals, a double standard exists for men and women. Men who let their hair gray are called "silver foxes," and their hair color is referred to as "salt and pepper." Women, on the other hand, get the message from a young age that we'd better cover up the gray. It's almost impossible to find a woman with naturally gray hair in the media; women must "age gracefully" by disguising their graying hairs, whereas a man with graying hair is called "distinguished." However, until the 1940s and '50s, most women didn't dye their grays (though not because it wasn't a beauty ideal but because it was considered something that only "loose" women did, and at that point, there was no way for a woman to change her hair color without going to a salon). That was until Clairol, a hair-coloring company, revamped the image of hair coloring to appeal to women's anxieties over aging. They ran advertisements telling women that their gray hair caused them to be old and "not fun," that it confined them to wearing clothing in "subdued colors," and that they could only have friends from the "older set." And a new hair-related beauty ideal was born.

Shiny White Teeth

I was watching an old episode of *Grey's Anatomy* recently (yes, I am still a devoted fan) and was struck by how not white, and not perfect, the actors' teeth were. This show was filmed less than twenty years ago, yet the difference was startling to me. Watch any television show or movie that was filmed before the early 2000s, and you'll see the same thing: everyone's teeth are a natural bone-white color and vary in size. In the mid-1990s, in-office teeth-whitening products first came to dentists' offices—closely followed by over-the-counter do-it-yourself products—and shiny, bright white teeth were advertised as the new beauty must-have. If you look at social media, magazines, or TV today, you'll find that all teeth are blindingly white, perfectly straight, and the same size. This "Hollywood smile" is now considered the norm in our youth- and status-obsessed society, even though white, straight, symmetrical teeth are not natural and only attainable at a cost.

Wrinkles

I've had many similar ah-ha moments watching the faces of people in television shows and movies from ten or twenty years ago. Take Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City.* In the iconic opening scene, Sarah Jessica Parker, the actress who plays Carrie, is thirty-two years old and has fine lines around her eyes and on the bridge of her nose (not to mention her forehead—it actually moves!). The scene was filmed in 1998, before Botox and cosmetic fillers became ubiquitous and fine lines on the face were considered normal. The FDA officially approved Botox Cosmetic for use on facial lines in 2002, giving the green light to Allergan, the maker of Botox, to begin a multimillion-dollar marketing campaign for the facial injectable. The company capitalized on the cultural pressure for women's bodies and faces to remain looking young and put out ad campaigns targeting middle-aged women.

Today almost 60 percent of Botox users are between the ages of forty-five and fifty-four. But the age of "selfie" culture, the proliferation of Photoshop and retouching, and the 24/7 stream of smooth jawlines, chiseled cheekbones, and wrinkle-free faces has spurred a younger demographic of women to use injectables. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, from 2010 to 2018, Botox procedures increased 28 percent among people between the ages of *twenty and twenty-nine.*[10] Botox is now being marketed toward younger women as a *preventative* measure—something they should use before fine lines or wrinkles even start to show. The thirty- to thirty-eight-year-old demographic now makes up almost 20 percent of all Botox injectable treatments annually. Unsurprisingly, women make up 94 percent of all Botox treatments (and 92 percent of cosmetic procedures overall).[11] The fact that young, wrinkle-free women are spending time and money getting Botox to freeze their faces preventatively says a lot about the demands that Western culture places on us to stay young.

Questioning and Experimenting with Beauty Ideals

It's not a bad thing to take part in any of these beauty ideals. They aren't inherently evil or wrong, and you may really enjoy partaking in certain beauty rituals. Not to mention that privilege, power, respect, and even higher

salaries can come from conforming to these standards. That's right: Studies have found that women who wear more makeup and are "well-groomed" make significantly more money than women who wear less makeup.[12] (Meanwhile, grooming doesn't come into play for men's salaries—surprise, surprise.) This is a problem because although some women enjoy beauty rituals, others do not. When opting out of adhering to societal beauty and body norms affects your paycheck, it stops being about choice and starts being about the control and oppression of women, fat folks, and BIPOC people.

At the same time, there is power in knowledge and in questioning: Are you taking part in certain beauty rituals because you want to or because you feel you have to? When you understand the roots of beauty ideals, you can begin to decenter appearance as the most important aspect of a woman's—and your—character. All women—and all humans—are worthy and valuable, no matter what they look like. When you can internalize this belief, then you don't *need* makeup or hair color to feel beautiful or visible or worthy. You don't *need* to cover up your skin. You don't *need* to avoid wrinkles. Instead, you get to *choose* which beauty products or ideals you want to partake in and which ones you don't. That's what freedom and liberation is: having a choice about what you want to do or not do; what you want to look like or not look like. For some, this could mean wearing makeup, using Botox, shaving their legs, or whitening their teeth. For others, freedom may mean opting out of these ideals. In the end it comes down to having the choice to do what makes you feel good.

Now, that doesn't change the fact that we are all a product of our upbringing and culture, and we don't make any decisions inside a vacuum. As long as women are held to unattainable beauty standards, and as long as it affects our earning potential, the urge and even the need to partake in beauty rituals will continue to persist. But when you are conscious of where these oppressive beauty ideals came from (i.e., they were created by white men and/or companies who profit from the ideals), why they continue to evolve and change (i.e., to continue to keep women and BIPOC people down and/or make money), and know that you have options outside of what society considers "normal," then you can make the decision that feels best for you.

Beauty rituals like makeup and hair grooming can be an empowering form of self-expression and identification. At the same time, if you're looking to move away from using certain beauty ideals on autopilot, it

can be freeing and liberating to experiment with rejecting certain social beauty norms. I, for one, found this to be the case when I began trying to go makeup-free a few years ago. (Important disclaimer: I hold a lot of privileges that made this experiment easier for me than it may be for other people. Despite my ever-multiplying face wrinkles, I am young, thin, white, and, even on my makeup-free days, I naturally fit into many conventional beauty ideals. So an experiment like this is going to be easier for me than it will for a person who is not thin, white, or young. But the end result—that is, how you feel—can be similar.) Although I have never been a huge makeup person, I, like many women, rarely used to leave the house with a naked face. Makeup made me feel prettier and more accepted. If I did go out of the house without makeup, I never felt as attractive or as confident. As I began learning about the origins of beauty ideals, I realized that I wanted to be able to feel comfortable and confident with or without makeup. At first, it was really hard. Going out to a restaurant in New York City on a Friday night without makeup felt like walking naked on a fashion runway. So I started slowly—first by leaving off foundation and then, gradually, cutting back on my eye makeup.

It took almost a full year, but I eventually got to a point where I felt 100 percent myself, comfortable and confident, makeup or not. I am now able to go out in public without hiding or camouflaging or covering any part of myself up, which—aside from taking way less time to get ready—feels really freaking liberating. Could I have gotten to the same place while still wearing makeup? Probably. But for me, going barefaced allowed me to get there much faster. It pushed me to work through the discomfort of feeling different, of not feeling like I looked "perfect." And it showed me that I can allow myself to be seen and be loved and be open as just me. Because my choosing to go barefaced was about way more than the makeup. Experimenting with this beauty ideal helped me to know what my full, true self is under the makeup. And I can let that shine through with or without any on—whichever I choose.

In the end, you get to choose what beauty ideals you partake in, whether that's wearing high heels and fashionable clothes, using hair dye, getting a blowout, shaving your legs, and even having plastic surgery. I get it—legs look fabulous in high heels, and a little mascara can work wonders. Plastic surgery can be life-changing for many people, including trans folks, people with disabilities, and people who want to use surgery to make changes to

their bodies. But we need to question why the vast majority of women feel obligated to spend their time and money on all of these external trappings, whereas very few men do. We also should wonder why the beauty and dieting industries target women far more than they do men. So I challenge you to dig deep and start to question the "why" behind your choices. Then maybe, if you feel comfortable, you can begin to play with letting some of those beauty ideals go—even if it's for just a little while. As one of my clients said, "I know now that I can wear whatever I want, not use makeup (or use it if I want), and be confident in who I am without letting other people's opinions sway me. It feels so empowering."

Explore Your Beauty Rituals

Make a list of the different beauty rituals you participate in and reflect upon why you do these things. Which of them do you do for yourself? Are there any that you do for others? Perhaps there is some overlap? Which of these do you enjoy? Are there any that you do because you feel like you have to?

Dieting as a Way to Belong

As our culture's body and beauty ideas were created, conforming to them was not only a way to achieve status or worth but a way to belong. The need to belong has a strong evolutionary benefit.[13] Way back when, belonging to a group was essential for human survival. Humans hunted together, cooked together, and protected the others in their group. When enemies would attack, or when it was difficult to find food or shelter, people who were part of a group were more likely to survive. If you didn't belong to a group, your chances of survival were low. In modern times, this is not necessarily the case, but humans still have a strong desire to belong to a social group and be accepted by others.

In present-day society, there is a strong negative bias against fat bodies (which I'll discuss in more detail in Chapter 3). As I mentioned earlier, body size is intertwined with morality, and we're programmed to believe that thin bodies are inherently "good," whereas fat bodies are "bad." People in fat bodies are marginalized and "othered," which means they're relegated

to the outskirts of society. As human beings with a strong need to belong, we are taught that we can avoid this marginalization if we make our bodies smaller—or at least *try* to make our bodies smaller. So belonging, for many people, requires dieting and food restriction. Dieting can also be a way that BIPOC people assimilate into Western society. To protect themselves against oppression, they may seek weight loss or pursue other white beauty ideals.

Much of the time, people are accepted by Western society only when they are thin, or when they are in the pursuit of thinness. As Noreen,* a former client of mine shared, "By dieting and making an effort to lose weight, I was attempting to show people that I deserve to be seen as valuable and to be treated well. When I was actively trying to no longer be fat, I fit into the box that society liked: I was being a 'good' fat person, and I was congratulated for doing the 'right' thing. Now that I have given up dieting and have chosen to embrace my body, rather than attempt to shrink it, people don't know what to do with me. I can no longer pretend that I'm trying to fit in, within a society where striving for the thin ideal is so ingrained."

Bonding Over Diet-Talk

What is seen at a larger societal level is also experienced within smaller social groups. These days, *not* dieting can feel like not belonging. In many families, workplaces, and social settings, it is considered normal to talk about what diet someone is on. Almost every single person that I work with tells me that they are the only person in their social group who is trying *not* to diet. This lack of community and outside pressure from friends and family makes taking an alternative path that much more difficult.

When I first began dieting in high school, I immediately got attention for eating "healthy" foods. Eating foods that were deemed "healthy" and "good" made me feel better than people who didn't seem to pay attention to what they ate; I felt morally superior. I loved the opportunity to talk about my diet and what I was (or was not) eating. As more and more of my peers got caught up in dieting, it became a form of bonding to talk about our diets and our weight loss and our bodies.

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* All current and former client names and identifying details have been changed to protect their privacy.

Fast-forward twenty years to a recent dinner out in New York City. I was dining with several smart, successful, interesting women, but the conversation was dominated by what they were eating. One of them had eliminated gluten and dairy; another one was midway through her third time with Whole30; yet another was raving about her experience with the keto diet. Years ago, I too would have joined in with the diet talk, happy to talk about what I was or wasn't eating. Instead, I sat there, frustrated that such successful women were wasting their time dieting, but also feeling somewhat left out that I couldn't (or wouldn't) contribute to the conversation. Even me, a firm anti-diet dietitian, still could feel a sense of not-belonging when the conversation turned to dieting.

Body Bashing

Body bashing is another phenomenon that frequently occurs when groups of women get together. Women often bond over their body shame, sharing the parts of themselves that they dislike, with each person chiming in with her own tales of body-hate. A scene from an episode of *Sex and the City,* a television show centered around four thin, white, wealthy, conventionally attractive women, illustrates this:

> Charlotte: "I hate my thighs."
> Miranda: "Well, I'll take your thighs and raise you a chin."
> Carrie: "I'll take your chin and raise you a [points at nose]."
> *They look expectantly at the fourth woman, Samantha, who refuses to participate.*
> "What?" Samantha says, "I happen to love the way I look."[14]

Another phrase that commonly arises in social circles (not to mention in every single form of media) is, "I feel so fat." This type of statement is invariably followed by someone else—a friend, a family member, a partner—reassuring them, "Oh no, you're not fat—you're beautiful." These types of comments have become so normalized, and even expected, that we don't even notice them for how damaging and fatphobic they are because those "reassurances" are saying that if someone is fat, they aren't beautiful. Body bashing only serves to reinforce the beliefs that thin is better than fat and that the most valuable aspect of a woman is her appearance.

Dieting as a Coping Mechanism

When Susann, now thirty-nine, was growing up, her home life was chaotic and unreliable. She never knew what kind of mood her parents were going to be in, and she never knew when the adults in her life were going to be there for her. "As a kid, I had so many big feelings, but there was no support and no one modeling how to cope with emotions," she shared with me. "So I started to eat in order to not feel those very big feelings." At eight years old, Susann began to use food to numb and cope with the emotions she was having because she was never taught any other way. "Having 'big feelings' was not okay in my family," she said. "The message that I received was that intense feelings were for 'crazy people,'▲ and I wanted to be better than that, so I kept my feelings inside and stayed 'in control.'"

At the same time, Susann was getting messages from her family members, as well as from the media and through friends, that being a "big girl" was not good and not desirable. "Since I didn't know how to cope with my feelings outside of eating, I went straight to intense food restricting and exercising, starting when I was ten years old," Susann explained. "Looking at the numbers on food labels and on the scale gave me a sense of control and pride. I ended up losing weight and got a ton of praise and attention for it. I felt like by controlling my body, I could control how other people viewed me."

When things feel out of control in life, many people turn to dieting. Trying to control something, like the food they eat or their body size, can provide a false sense of security. This sense of control can, in the moment, make someone feel more stable and safe. Neuroscience explains this phenomenon. Our brains are wired to keep us safe. Each time you go through some type of "threat," your brain is wired to remember that threat and—the next time it arises—old thought patterns and behaviors emerge as coping mechanisms. This means that, in response to stress or chaos, negative body thoughts can arise, and the urge to perform dieting behaviors, whether through food restriction or exercising, increases. Therefore, dieting can be a

▲ The word *crazy* is an ableist term. When we call someone crazy, we are basically saying that that person's lived experience doesn't make sense or isn't valid. The word *crazy* has been used as a tool of oppression to make marginalized folks question their reality so that they think they are the problem or that something is inherently bad about them. Read more at https://www.npr.org/2019/07/08/739643765/why-people-are-arguing-to-stop-using-the-words-crazy-and-insane.

way to feel safe and in control while it distracts from the other, more overwhelming emotions that may feel hard to deal with.

Another client of mine, Nina, experienced this firsthand. "When I look back, my periods of dieting almost always coincided with me feeling out of control in another part of my life. I first started dieting around the time that my parents announced they were getting a divorce; another phase of dieting coincided with my husband losing his job. Whenever life feels chaotic, I notice more of an urge to restrict my food or to try a new diet. Instead of dealing with the issue, I cope by turning to dieting and exercise."

Dieting is the ultimate coping mechanism because it keeps us distracted from difficult feelings and helps us feel like we have control even when we really don't. But dieting is a counterproductive coping mechanism because, eventually, it doesn't work. (I'll share the reasons why in Chapter 2.) The next distraction tactic we tend to jump to is judging ourselves as having "failed." Then back to the diet, to try to get "control" again, and round and round it goes.

Although controlling what you eat may feel good in the short term, it doesn't help to address the actual problem, *and* it causes more issues in the long run. The reality is that you don't actually have control over much of what happens in life. That means trying to control things will keep you in a loop of continuing to feel unsafe and anxious. In Chapter 10, I'll share more on ways you can safely give up the need to control, but for now, remember that having an urge to diet probably means something bigger is going on.

While dieting itself is often used as an oppressive force, it can also be a way that folks in marginalized bodies cope with the oppression they experience daily. As Carolina Guízar, a Mexican-American dietitian based in New York City, explains, "Diet culture can be a positive distraction from the oppression that people of color and people in larger bodies face on a daily basis. Dieting can be a way of coping with the pain of constantly being 'othered' and judged by the color of their skin or the size of their body, while also helping one assimilate into a culture that prizes smaller, white bodies and specific foods."[15] When it comes to people in larger bodies, dieting may be a way in which they gain access to healthcare or physical infrastructure (like chairs or airplane seats) that is denied to them because of their size. For example, many surgeons require people to be below a certain weight before they'll perform lifesaving surgeries. In many ways, for folks in larger bodies,

dieting can be a way (if only in the short term) of coping and assimilating into a culture that is so centered upon, and built for, smaller bodies.

Our culture feeds us messages that certain bodies are "not enough," and that there is something wrong with us if we don't fit the ideal. The diet and beauty industries capitalize on this, marketing to people who believe they need to lose weight to become a "better" version of themselves. Most people have not processed all of the ways in which they've been told that their body is "wrong." So, very often, dieting is a way to cope with these messages rather than face deep wounds.

Body and Beauty Ideals Steal Our Time, Money, and Energy

Society encourages people to change *themselves* to better fit into the (white and male-dominated) world. Conforming to body and beauty ideals is time-consuming and expensive (not to mention futile). The more time we spend trying to "fix" ourselves, the less time we have for other things. Years ago, a group of friends and I were discussing our getting-ready rituals before a night out. For most of us, it went something like this: wash and blow dry hair, shave legs and underarms, make sure to get a bikini wax *just in case,* apply makeup, and decide on the "right" outfit (which often entailed at least a few phone calls or texts to get a friend's opinion). One of our guy friends sat there listening with his jaw open—he could not believe the amount of time we spent getting ready. When we asked him what he did before a night out, he said, "Well, I take a shower and put on a clean shirt." That was it. Meanwhile, we women were spending several hours prepping—just for one night out. And we weren't even considering the time, money, and energy we had spent on dieting, diet plans, "healthy" food, or gym memberships.

When you extrapolate this one scenario to a lifetime of trying to comply with society's body and beauty standards, just think of all the time, energy, and money that is spent. As society's marginalized groups continue to push back against the thin ideal and other white, Eurocentric beauty standards, the definition of "beautiful" and "desirable" continues to change and evolve. In doing so, it keeps us continually striving for an arbitrary "ideal" and costing us much of our time, money, and energy.

Once again, this is not to shame anyone who attempts to conform to these body or beauty ideals. For many marginalized folks, working to achieve these ideals may be a way of protecting themselves against the oppression that they face. But the more you can work to not let how your body looks or what size it is hold you back from living out your values and being fully yourself, the more you can be free. And the more of us who are free, the more social and political impact we can have both individually and collectively. Because no one is free from oppression until all bodies are liberated.

Body Autonomy and the Power of Choice

There is power in knowledge and in understanding how our society's different beauty and body standards came to be. Although the knowledge doesn't negate the oppression that anyone in a marginalized body faces, it shifts the blame to the true culprit. You are not to blame for "failing" to lose weight or maintain a certain size body. The blame sits squarely on the shoulders of the system that was set up to overpower you.

All behaviors are adaptive and begin for a reason. At some point in your life, dieting was probably something that served you. Perhaps it made you feel safe, accepted, or in control. And you may still find that, to this day, dieting is something that keeps you feeling safe. I can't and won't ever tell someone what to do with their body. However, I *can* encourage you to unpack and dismantle the beliefs about food and body size that society has programmed into you. You may begin to recognize how suffocating it has been to prioritize the look and size of your body above all else. Then you can reject the messages, beliefs, and behaviors that keep you in that cage. When you step out of that cage, you can begin the process of coming home to yourself and redefining what self-acceptance means to you. This is when magic happens.

If there is still part of you that is unsure about all of this, that is okay. My goal is to support you, if and when you decide that you're ready, to explore a life without dieting or attempting to shrink your body. If you've gotten this far, my guess is that there is at least part of you ready to walk down this new path. So let's begin the unpacking, unlearning, and redefining.

CHAPTER 2

Your Brain on Diets

Each year, more than 50 percent of American adults try to lose weight. The diet industry in the United States makes more than $70 billion per year. (Yes, that is *billion.*) Yet research shows that 90 to 97 percent of people who lose weight through dieting will regain it within two to five years.[1] How is this possible? Turns out it has nothing to do with people "failing" the diets, and everything to do with diets failing the people.

Before I dive into this more, I want to pause to define *diets* and *dieting*. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the word *diet* as follows:

1. food and drink regularly provided or consumed
2. habitual nourishment
3. the kind and amount of food prescribed for a person or animal for a special reason
4. a regimen of eating and drinking sparingly so as to reduce one's weight

Merriam-Webster also defines the word *diet* when it is used as a verb:

1. to cause to take food
2. to cause to eat and drink sparingly or according to prescribed rules[2]

The word *diet* was historically used to refer to what a person usually eats; it was a neutral descriptor. Since the diet industry has co-opted the word, it is most often used to describe the *absence* of eating something. We now most often see the word used when it's linked to weight loss or certain food rules.

I'm going to talk a lot about diets and dieting in this book, so let's make sure we're on the same page as to what I am referencing when I use these terms. Most people understand the words *diet* or *dieting* to mean diet programs such as the Atkins Diet, the South Beach Diet, Jenny Craig, the keto (or ketogenic) diet, and the Paleo diet. Although I definitely consider those diets, my definition of a *diet* or *dieting* is much broader. When I use those terms, I'm referring instead to any way of eating that is dictated by external forces rather than internal ones. A diet is when someone or something outside of yourself determines *what* you eat, *when* you eat, or *how* you eat. It is any activity, system, company, person, or program that promotes its way of eating (and/or exercising) as one that helps you lose weight. By this definition, the word *diet* expands to include activities like counting calories, macros, or points and measuring or weighing food; terms like *portion control, clean eating, watching what you eat;* labels for foods such as "good" or "bad"; and cheat meals or cheat days. The word *diet* also includes programs or ways of eating that identify themselves as (or are identified by others as) "wellness" related, including WW (formerly Weight Watchers) intermittent fasting, and Whole30, as well as apps like Noom or MyFitnessPal. These diets may be marketed as a way to manipulate your body size or appearance, or they may not—or at least not overtly.

This is where it gets tricky because many of these diets and their promoters claim that they are *not* diets. In fact, many people I work with tell me that they've never "really" dieted. Then, when I ask them about their food history, they tell me about cutting out all sorts of foods and food groups, trying to "watch" what they eat by not having too much sugar or carbohydrate, or doing Whole30 every January. These behaviors *are* dieting. No matter whether you call it wellness, a lifestyle change, or something else, if it involves external control and the hope or promise of weight loss, then it is a diet. Now a part of you may be thinking, "Well, I'm really doing this for health reasons." That is all well and good, but if you still harbor the hope—either conscious or subconscious—of losing weight or gaining "control" of your eating or your body, then you're still dieting.

Diet Culture Is Everywhere

As I explained in the previous chapter, everyone in the United States (and many other countries) is indoctrinated into a culture of dieting and weight "control" from a very early age. Diet culture is pervasive in almost every aspect of our society. We are exposed to it throughout our medical system, education system, public health entities, and all forms of media, including news programming, advertising, television, and films. It's so insidious that it can often be difficult to identify. We are so used to its existence that we don't even question it. Yet when you start paying attention, you'll notice how pervasive diet culture is. Here are some examples of diet culture:

- Commenting on a meal, "Oh, I could never eat that; if I did, I'd be huge!"
- Describing a weekend of eating as being "off the wagon."
- Planning to "start over on Monday."
- Using terms like *bad, naughty, guilty pleasure,* or *indulgence* to describe food.
- Looking in the mirror and saying, "I feel so fat."
- Hearing someone else describe themselves as fat and responding with, "You're not fat; you're beautiful!" (The subtext: Fat is bad, and fat is not beautiful.)
- A grocery store clerk complimenting a shopper for being "so good" for having so many "healthy" foods in their grocery cart.
- Going to see a doctor for an earache and being told you need to lose weight.
- Exercising to "work off" a meal or compensate for your eating.
- Mentioning the "obesity epidemic" (without the quotation marks).
- Portraying fat people on TV or in movies as the "bad guy" or the lazy, stupid, and/or funny sidekick.

On the surface, many of these examples may not seem all that bad, but, as you'll see shortly, this ever-present diet culture has a huge effect on our bodies, our minds, and our lives. Not to mention that it objectifies and elevates thin, white bodies while oppressing and marginalizing fat, BIPOC bodies. This diet culture—and the resulting diet industry—was birthed by a patriarchal, Eurocentric culture that rose to power through exploiting, oppressing, and controlling other people's bodies. In other words, diet

culture, and the dieting industry, is inherently sexist, racist, and ableist—even if people don't realize it.

In the United States, the diet industry takes advantage of the insecurities and lack of self-trust instilled in us by diet culture. It then makes more than $70 billion per year capitalizing off of our shame.[3] Each year, as many as 50 percent of Americans aged twenty and older try to lose weight. Diet culture affects all people, but women are more likely than men to report trying to lose weight: 56 percent said they'd tried to lose weight compared to 42 percent of men.[4] A 2008 survey of more than 4,000 American women aged twenty-five to forty-five found that 67 percent of women were trying to lose weight.[5] Dieting has become so common and normalized that we even see high rates of it in children and adolescents. A survey of high school students in 2017 found that 60 percent of females and 34 percent of males were attempting to lose weight, while 46 percent of nine- to eleven-year-olds are "sometimes" or "very often" on diets.[6] These numbers were even higher in college-aged women: 91 percent of women surveyed on a college campus had tried to control their weight by dieting.[7]

The dieting industry continues to grow year over year, making billions of dollars by convincing us that our bodies need to be changed and that we can't trust ourselves to determine how to eat. It preys on people's insecurities, which have developed as a result of growing up in a diet culture, and compels millions of people every year to spend massive amounts of time, money, and energy trying to lose weight. The diet industry makes its money by persuading you that the next time you try will be different. That if you just buy its product or service, you will finally lose weight, get "healthy," and get "in shape." As people catch on to the diet industry's BS, diet culture changes its form to keep us ensnared.

1960s

Cabbage soup diet; launch of Overeaters Anonymous; first iteration of Weight Watchers

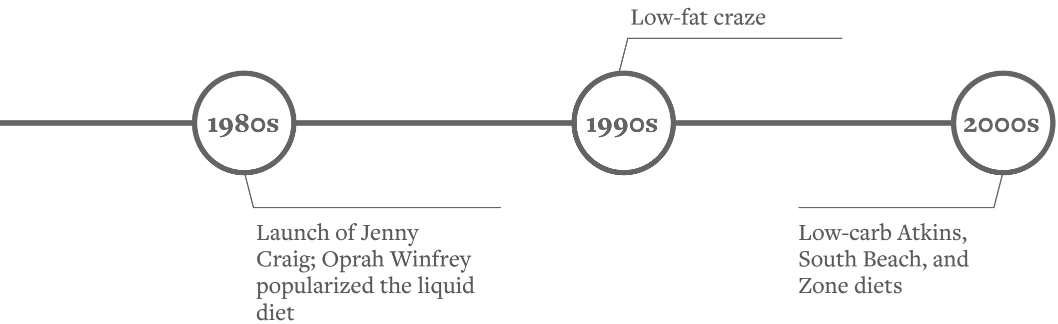
1970s

Grapefruit diet; launch of Slimfast; low-fat diet in the Dietary Goals for the U.S.

Diet Trends in the Twentieth Century

Over the years, the diet trend has shifted. The 1960s gave us the cabbage soup diet, the launch of Overeaters Anonymous, and the first iteration of Weight Watchers. In the 1970s, we got the grapefruit diet and the launch of Slimfast, as well as the first endorsement by the federal government of a low-fat diet in the Dietary Guidelines for the United States. In the 1980s, Jenny Craig opened its first weight-loss clinic, and Oprah Winfrey popularized the liquid diet when she went on national TV to announce her dramatic weight loss. The low-fat craze took off even more in the 1990s, and fat became the most demonized component of our meals. The pendulum swung in the opposite direction a decade later, as Dr. Robert Atkins released the third version of his high-fat, low-carb *Atkins Diet* book, followed closely by low-carbohydrate diets like The South Beach Diet and The Zone Diet. The early-2000s saw low-carb foods overtake the fat-free and low-fat products on shelves, in diet books, and in media around the world. Carbohydrates became the new diet devil, whereas fat made a comeback. In the last decade, the Atkins Diet and the South Beach Diet have fallen out of favor to be replaced by other (very similar) low-carb diets like the ketogenic and Paleo diets. Now people are all about fattier foods such as avocados, whole eggs, and nuts as they shun bread, pasta, and fruit. Diets continue to shape-shift with one goal: continue to hook people onto dieting and make money (to the tune of $70+ billion per year).

In recent years, the diet industry, sensing consumers' changing attitudes about dieting, has begun to pivot away from selling restrictive, weight-loss-focused diets. As more and more people start to view "traditional" diets



as old-school, and millennials see most fad diets as something of their parents' era, the diet industry has had to change gears to stay relevant. So the industry has reinvented itself as the champion for wellness and health—a "lifestyle change" instead of a weight-loss diet. For example, in 2019, Weight Watchers rebranded as WW to take the word *weight* out of its name. The company declared that its focus was no longer weight loss but overall health and wellness. The rebranding even included a new tagline: "Wellness that works." Yet the same systems still remained in place: counting points, weekly weigh-ins, and setting "goal weights." The program isn't really about wellness, and it *is* still about weight loss; the company's business model hasn't changed. So why the name change? Simple: Company leadership was trying to reach more people and increase profits.

The Wellness Diet

Christy Harrison, MPH, RD, author of the book *Anti-Diet* and host of the podcast *Food Psych,* calls the shift from weight-focused diet programs to wellness-centric ones *The Wellness Diet.* Under the umbrella of The Wellness Diet, you can find things like "clean" eating, detoxes, cleanses, gluten-free, dairy-free, and other elimination diets. As Harrison explains, "*The Wellness Diet* is my term for the sneaky, modern guise of diet culture that's supposedly about 'wellness' but is actually about performing a rarefied, perfectionistic,

discriminatory idea of what health is supposed to look like."[8] The diet industry is taking the same system of body oppression and renaming it under the pretense of "health and wellness." Health and wellness then become just another way to oppress and control groups of people, especially women, BIPOC people, and fat people.

On the surface, these wellness diets may not explicitly say that they promote weight loss, but it is still the underlying theme. Look no further than the popular elimination diet plan, the Whole30. This thirty-day program claims to help you transform your "health, habits and emotional relationship with food" and discover "food freedom."[9] Scroll a bit further down the page, though, and the website touts the benefit of "losing weight healthfully and sustainably"—proof that this program is still about weight loss, just under the guise of wellness. The Whole30 organization tries to argue that it's not a diet, yet if you go back to my original definition earlier in this chapter, this is exactly what it is. There are extensive "rules" that you must follow, including the removal of several primary food groups and a whole list of ingredients that are "not allowed." It advocates for not weighing yourself during the thirty days, yet allows "photos and/or measurements on Days 0 and 31." Now, perhaps weight loss is not everyone's primary reason for trying the Whole30 plan, but if you were to look underneath this guise of "wellness" and "finding what foods work for you," you still get the implied message: *and you'll lose weight.*

Almost everyone I've worked with over the past decade has done Whole30 at least once, if not multiple times, and every single person has told me a version of the same story. As one of my clients shared with me, "I loved the structure and the rules of the Whole30; they made me feel safe and less anxious. I always feel great when I start it, then I eat one 'off-plan' food, and I spiral out of control. It is so restrictive that at the end, I always end up out of control, eating everything in sight. Then I end up with worse food habits than when I started." This experience is not exclusive to Whole30. There is an entire market of new diet plans, companies, and apps created with the promise of the ability to "stop dieting" and "still get results." Even if weight isn't mentioned upfront, the subtext is still that this will be the plan that helps you lose weight "for good." But this isn't even close to the truth.

Dieting Doesn't Work

With revenue of $70 billion per year, you'd assume that the dieting industry offers effective products. Yet, as I shared earlier, at least 90 to 97 percent of people who lose weight through dieting will regain it within two to five years, which means that most of the time, diets *do not* result in long-term weight loss.[10] Despite all the ads that say otherwise, it is very rare for people to lose weight and keep it off "for good." Not only that but one- to two-thirds of people who diet regain *more* weight than they originally lost, ending up at a higher weight than where they started. A review of more than thirty long-term studies showed that going on a diet actually *causes* weight gain. The more diets someone has tried, the more they weigh.[11] So, not only does dieting not work for long-term weight loss, but it is also associated with increased risk of binge-eating, eating disorders, and long-term weight *gain*.[12] Weight-loss programs have more than a 90 percent failure rate, yet we continue to blame ourselves and our willpower rather than placing the blame where it really belongs: on the product (aka the diet) that doesn't do what it's advertised to do.

In reality, less than 5 percent of people who attempt to lose weight will keep it off in the long run; even then, the average amount of weight loss maintained is only about 2.4 pounds.[13] Those who do maintain their weight loss are usually engaged in very disordered food and exercise behaviors—ones that, if they were in a thin body, would be considered an eating disorder.[14] Yet in people at higher weights, these behaviors are considered to be "healthy" and are encouraged. Diet culture strikes again.

Diets Make People Unhealthier

Not only do diets fail at making us thinner, but they also make us unhealthier. Dieting and intentional weight-loss efforts lead to food and body preoccupation, overeating and bingeing, lower self-esteem, weight cycling, and disordered eating behaviors and eating disorders.[15] The 2008 survey I mentioned earlier found that 65 percent of women aged twenty-five to forty-five had some form of disordered eating, and another 10 percent met the criteria for eating disorders.[16] That means that three out of four women

eat abnormally or think about or behave abnormally around food, including skipping meals, restricting major food groups, binge-eating, and restrained or controlled eating. Feelings of guilt and stress over food are also common. Dieting is the most common type of disordered eating. And consider this: A child is 242 times more likely to have an eating disorder than they are to have type 2 diabetes.[17] If you took a sample of 100,000 children, only 12 would have type 2 diabetes, whereas 2,900 would meet the criteria for an eating disorder. Yet the vast majority of our public health education is spent warning parents about "childhood obesity," which has led to a generation of dieters and is a sign that dieting is not really about health.

Although not all dieters progress to eating disorders, the majority of people diagnosed with an eating disorder have a history of dieting. The best-known environmental contributor to the development of eating disorders is our society's idealization of thinness and the stigmatization of, and discrimination against, fat bodies.[18] The prevailing belief is that eating disorders primarily affect young, thin, affluent, white women, but this generalization couldn't be further from the truth. Eating disorders affect people of all sizes, races, and gender identities. Transgender people are much more likely to experience symptoms of disordered eating and eating disorders compared with those who are cisgender.[19] A 2018 survey found that the prevalence of eating disorders in transgender youth is as high as 71 percent.[20] When it comes to race, there is a huge disparity in how women are diagnosed and treated. One study had clinicians read a description of disordered eating patterns, with race as the only variable factor.[21] While 44 percent of clinicians identified the white women's behavior as problematic, only 17 percent identified the same behaviors as problematic in the Black women. These disparities affect people of color and indigenous folks as well. In 2016, Gloria Lucas founded Nalgona Positivity Pride, a Xicana-Indigenous body positive and eating disorder awareness organization, in response to the lack of resources that exist for low-income people of color and indigenous-descent people. "Eating disorders have been seen as mainly impacting white, privileged women and therefore awareness and treatment have been centered on this demographic," she said in an interview with the National Eating Disorders Association. "The violent establishment of this country created multi-generation legacies of disparities, economic inequality, and historical trauma all which impact health, representation, and resources."[22]

The eating disorders of people at higher weights often go undiagnosed as well, and this group is less likely to receive treatment for their eating disorders. Eating disorder treatment centers are notorious for having a fatphobia and weight stigma problem. I've heard so many stories from fat folks who were in treatment for eating disorders, yet were fat-shamed, limited to a certain number of calories, and prohibited from eating between meals. As Deb Burgard, PhD, a psychologist who specializes in eating disorders, says, "We prescribe for fat people what we diagnose as disordered in thin people."[23] Almost every one of my clients has been shamed for their weight or praised for losing weight. And all of their disordered eating behaviors started when they went on a diet or tried to "eat healthier."

Weight cycling, or repeated cycles of intentional weight loss followed by unintentional weight gain (also known as yo-yo dieting), is also very common among dieters. This was the case for Alex who, at thirty-six years old, had been dieting since she was ten years old. She lost large amounts of weight a few times on different diets: once in high school, again in her mid-twenties, and then once more in her early thirties. However, the weight always came back, and each time she regained more weight than she had lost. "I would go on a diet and lose the weight, but then the second I got praise from people I would just start eating again," she told me. The majority of my clients share similar stories of repeated attempts to lose weight, only to regain it. I've had multiple clients report gaining and losing hundreds of pounds over their decades of dieting. This pattern of repeatedly losing and regaining weight has a negative effect on a person's health. It increases the risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, chronic inflammation, certain forms of cancer, and even death.[24] Weight cycling is an *independent risk factor* for poor health outcomes, which means that losing and regaining weight is worse for a person's health than staying at a higher weight. Not to mention that weight cycling may explain some, if not all, of the increased disease risk and poor health outcomes we see in people who have a higher BMI.[25]

It's important to note that I am *not* saying weight gain itself is bad, nor is the inability to lose weight a problem. Despite what our society has programmed us to believe, fat bodies are not bad. Plus, as I'll discuss in Chapter 3, weight and health are not as inextricably linked as diet culture has led us to believe. Weight is not a good indicator for health (let alone human worth or value), and being at a higher weight has not been shown to directly

cause health problems. Most of the differences we see in health outcomes between thin people and fat people probably have to do with weight stigma, rather than weight itself. I'll get into this more soon; for now, I just want to be clear: *There is nothing wrong with being fat.*

Dissecting the Problem

Make a list of every single thing that you have tried to do to "fix" your body. This could include diets, exercise plans, medications, supplements, food delivery services, spa treatments, etc. Then evaluate these strategies:

- How far did each of these strategies take you toward "fixing" your food and body image issues?
- What happened after you stopped using these strategies?
- What did using these strategies cost you when it comes to your time, money, energy, brain space, emotional or physical state, etc.?

Why Diets "Fail"

The dictionary defines *willpower* as "the ability to control one's own actions, emotions or urges." It shares how one can use willpower in a sentence: "The dessert buffet tested my willpower."[26] What a perfect example of diet culture, right within the dictionary. Diet culture likes to make you think that it is your lack of willpower that causes you not to be able to eat "correctly" or lose weight. It places the blame on the individual, saying that if only you had the self-control to eat "right," then you'd be able to keep the weight off. That idea couldn't be further from the truth, yet the dieting industry wants people to believe this because it keeps them going back to dieting, which means more money in companies' pockets. Think about it: If dieting *really* worked, then the entire dieting industry would tank overnight. My anti-diet colleagues and I often say that our goal is to get to a place where we're out our jobs because it would mean that our society's sexist, racist body ideals would be dismantled, and people would be able to be accepting of their bodies no matter what their size.

The reality is that the vast majority of people are unable to lose weight not because they lack willpower but because the human body is wired for survival. Our bodies are much smarter than we give them credit for. We have a complex biological system that works to ensure we get enough food to stay alive. When you restrict or limit certain types of food or cut back on the amount of food you eat, your body gets the message that you are starving, so it switches into survival mode. It doesn't matter if you are surrounded by enough food to feed you for weeks. Your body is still biologically wired as it was centuries ago when food was truly scarce, and the ability to store extra calories as fat and burn fewer calories at rest was a genetic survival mechanism. Now, any threat of restriction or food scarcity (like a new diet or setting food rules) feels to your body like starvation is coming. And when your body senses starvation, it does everything it can to try to keep you alive and to keep you within your set point weight range.[27]

Set Point Theory

Set point theory describes the idea that an individual body is genetically programmed to stay within a certain weight range. As a person loses or gains weight, their body compensates to get back into that set point range. It's estimated that the average person's set point range can vary by 10 to 20 pounds, though it's often a much bigger range if you're constantly dieting.[28] Your set point weight range is not set (no pun intended) in stone. It can change over time due to things like genetics, weight-loss attempts, hormonal shifts, and aging. That's because, despite what diet culture says, you aren't meant to stay the same weight for your entire life.

Everyone's set point is different. For many people, their set point weight falls on the higher end of the spectrum, into the "overweight" or "obese" BMI categories.[29] This is completely normal. We are not all meant to have the same size body, just as we are all not meant to have the same height, foot size, or hair color. Body size diversity is inherent within a population and is something that we can—and should—respect rather than trying to change.

At this point, many people ask, "Well, how can I figure out my set point weight?" or "How long will it take for my weight to stabilize in my set point range?" If I were to put my nutrition therapist hat on, I'd be curious to

understand *why* you want to know what your set point is. This is a great place to dig deeper to uncover your beliefs about body size (which you'll do in Chapter 5). The thing is, whenever you try to control your weight—even to "get to" your set point—you're still doing a form of dieting. There is no objective way to determine what your set point weight is (and anyone who says there is is telling you some total BS). Trying to "figure it out" or worrying whether you are above or below it only keeps you stuck in the dieting cycle and disconnected from your body.

That disconnect is one of the reasons why I find set point *not* to be a helpful concept to most people. It continues to put the focus on weight. I introduced set point theory here because it helps explain why trying to "control" weight doesn't work. My hope is that you won't get caught up in whether you're at your set point. Instead, just know that when you eat based on internal cues and stop trying to interfere by dieting, your body will *eventually* settle within your set point weight *range*. Emphasis on *range* because, even when you're not dieting, your weight will naturally fluctuate and change over time. Also, I put emphasis on *eventually* because when you stop dieting, it's common to initially gain some weight as you go through a period of food habituation, which I talk about more soon.

Without any external interference, our bodies respect our set point weight range (even if society and the culture at large do not). In their book *Body Respect*, Lindo Bacon and Lucy Aphramor offer a helpful analogy around set point. "Your set point is controlled similar to a thermostat. Imagine you set your home thermostat to 65 degrees. Every thermostat is programmed to maintain a certain acceptable range. Let's suppose your range is 4 degrees. This means your temperature control system won't get too aggressive as long as the house stays between 63 and 67 degrees. However, if the temperature drops below 63 degrees, the heat turns on...Likewise, if it gets hotter than 67 degrees, the air conditioning comes on."[30]

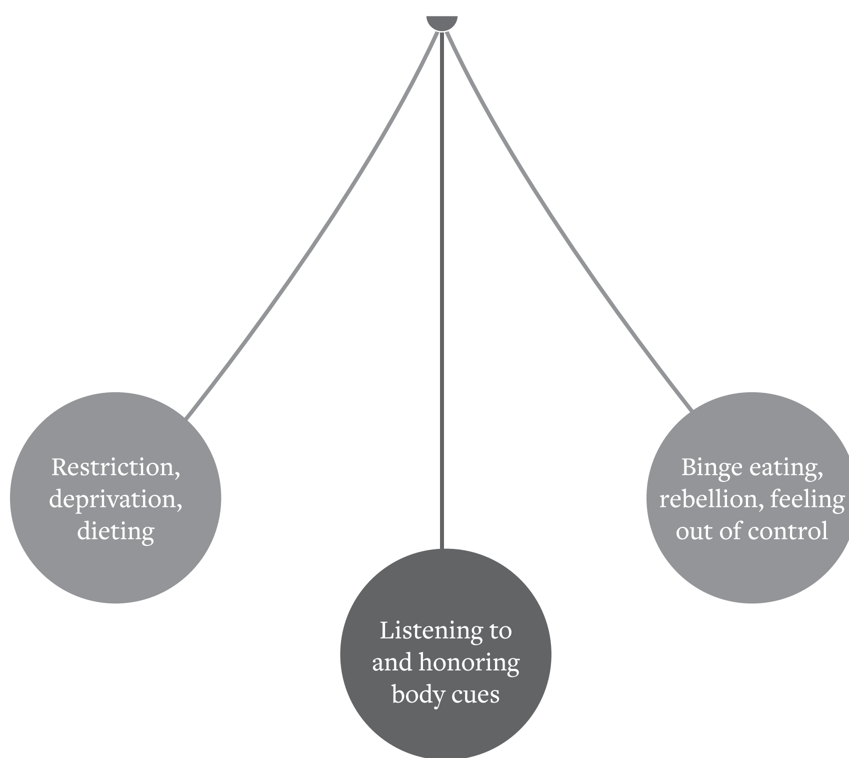
Similar to a thermostat, your body pulls out all the stops to try to keep your weight within its genetically programmed set point range. Whenever you drop lower than your set point, your body feels threatened, so it does everything it can to help you regain weight. It does this in a variety of ways, including the following:

- Decreasing your metabolic rate (aka the number of calories your body needs each day to stay alive)
- Decreasing thyroid activity (which is involved in regulating metabolism)
- Decreasing levels of your fullness hormones
- Increasing levels of your hunger hormones
- Increasing your cravings for calorie-dense foods[31]

This system only works the way it is supposed to if you let it. If you keep messing with the thermostat by dieting or manipulating food and exercise to "control" your weight, it breaks down. Your body fights even harder to regain control of your weight-regulation mechanism. This is why two-thirds of people not only regain the initial weight they lost but also put on some "extra" pounds post-diet. The body increases weight a bit higher than it was before to protect against subsequent attempts of thermostat fiddling (that is, future diets). With every attempt to diet, the rate of weight loss slows down, which is the reason you might find that the weight comes off easily during your first diet, but subsequent attempts don't have the same results. Over time, chronic dieting can increase your set point weight range, and these biological responses kick in even if you are at a higher weight than "usual."

The Deprivation-Binge Pendulum

Your body responds in much the same way whenever it feels like starvation is on the horizon, even if your weight hasn't changed. To your body, dieting feels like starvation. Your body doesn't want you to starve, or die, so it responds by increasing your appetite, lowering your fullness signals, and increasing your cravings, especially for energy-dense foods like those high in sugar and fat. This happens even if you are not actively dieting. I often see people who say they've given up dieting but are still thinking like dieters—still conscious of everything they eat, still judging their food choices, still feeling bad when they feel they've eaten the "wrong" thing or "too much," still trying to control themselves around food even if they're not technically following a specific diet. Although you may not be depriving yourself through traditional diets, the threat of future deprivation is implied when you aren't letting yourself have certain foods, aren't keeping all kinds of



foods around, or feel guilty or ashamed about what you're eating. You send your body the conscious or subconscious message, "Tomorrow, I'll try not to do this again," which your body hears as, "Better get food in now." This type of sneaky diet mentality will cause the same outcome as traditional dieting: a bigger appetite and more food cravings.

Biologically, this makes sense: If you really were in a famine, energy-dense foods and an increased appetite would be a great way to save your life. But what ends up happening is you enter into the deprivation-binge pendulum.

On one side of the pendulum is deprivation. When you begin to restrict your food intake, whether it's through cutting out certain foods, counting calories, "flexible dieting," or any other type of external control, your body senses deprivation. To your body, even the most nonrestrictive diet can feel like starvation. You end up swinging all the way to the left side of the

pendulum. And maybe you can stay there for a little while, but eventually, your body's starvation mechanism (increased hunger and cravings) kicks in, and you end up swinging all the way to the right: to the binge side.

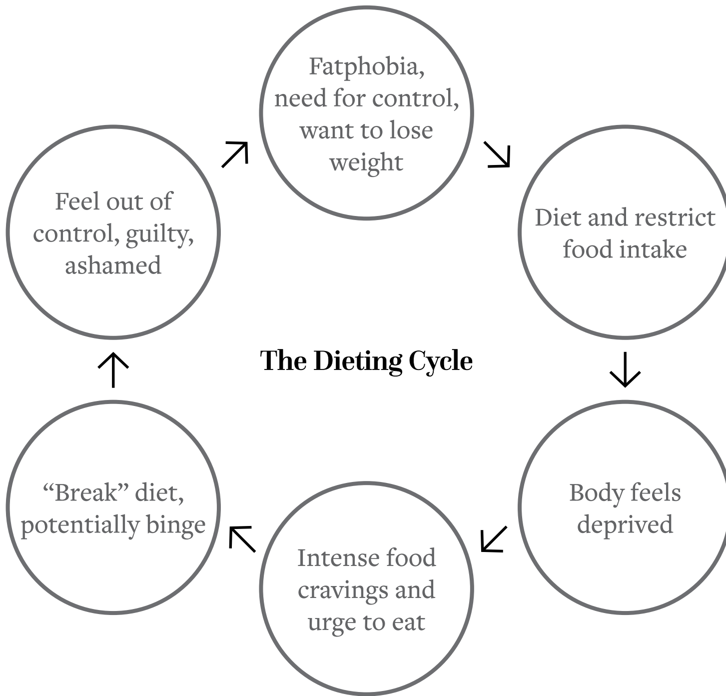
Those of you who've been in this pendulum know what it feels like to swing from restriction and its intense hunger and cravings to a sense of being out of control around food, which usually leads to overeating and bingeing. Often what happens at this point is that people feel guilty and out of control and think they need to diet again to get "back on the wagon," which sends them all the way back to the left side of the pendulum: to deprivation.

The swinging motion of a pendulum is controlled by gravity. In our bodies, this deprivation-binge pendulum is controlled by genetics and biology. Pull the pendulum to one side; what does it do when you release it? Swings wildly over to the other side, then back and forth, back and forth. It's impossible to stop that pendulum by exerting control over your eating behaviors. It will just keep on swinging.

Here's what can happen: You decide to cut back on sugar and plan to "allow" yourself to have sweets only on occasion. You get rid of all the sugar in your house and stock up on all sorts of "healthy" food and dessert alternatives. For a few weeks, everything goes great, and you're able to stick to these rules. Then, you start to notice more cravings for ice cream, cookies, and candy. You try to eat a "healthier" version, but the craving doesn't go away. Finally, you break down and buy a pint of ice cream and eat it all in one sitting. Afterward, you feel guilty, ashamed, and down on yourself and vow that you'll never eat any sugar again.

The Dieting Cycle

Another helpful concept in explaining why diets don't work is the dieting cycle.



When you restrict certain foods or food groups, you may be able to avoid eating those foods for several days or even several weeks, but eventually, your body feels deprived. This deprivation feels to your body like starvation, so you end up getting cravings, "breaking" the diet, and, often, overeating and bingeing. This can cause you to feel out of control, ashamed, and guilty, and so, to regain control, you start dieting and restricting again. Which eventually leads to deprivation, breaking the diet, bingeing, followed again by guilt. And the cycle continues.

Now let me be clear: This isn't your fault—it is the fault of the diet, the restriction, and the deprivation. Your biological system makes it nearly impossible to eat less than you need, willpower or not. The only way to get

out of the dieting cycle is to let go of restriction and stop trying to control your eating. When you do this, your body can move out of its feast or famine mode, and the pendulum will come to a gentle swing close to the middle of the arc. I'll talk more about how you can go about this in Part 2.

The Science of Habituation

Another phenomenon at play is *habituation,* which means that the more you are exposed to something—whether that be a food, a noise, or a certain smell—the less you notice or respond to it. After living in New York City for more than twelve years, I've become habituated to the near-constant noise. The car horns, the ambulance sirens, the garbage trucks at all hours of the night—at this point, it's mostly background noise. Yet whenever a friend from out of town comes to visit, they always comment on how *loud* it is. It is always funny to me because I hardly hear it anymore; I have almost no response to it. However, my out-of-town friends who live in quiet suburbs are not used to these sounds, so their heart rate jumps whenever a siren goes off, and they barely sleep, kept awake by the sounds of the city.

Habituation also happens with food. If you restrict certain foods or try to keep them out of your house, it makes these foods more exciting and desirable. You tell yourself you can't have them, and then your brain fixates on them. It makes sense that, when you finally get access to those foods, you find it hard to control yourself or stop eating. Your body has no idea when you'll allow yourself to eat that food again, so it keeps driving you to eat more and more.

On the other hand, when you allow yourself to eat all sorts of foods and keep these foods around you, they become less exciting, and the desire to eat them diminishes.[32] One of my clients went through this with macaroni and cheese, a meal she had loved but kept mostly off limits because she could never stop eating it and always ate to the point of being uncomfortably full. During our work together, she decided to permit herself to eat it whenever she wanted so she could work on habituating to it. At first, she ended up having it three or four nights a week and often ate until she felt uncomfortably full, but she continued to keep it in the house and allow herself to have it. One day, after several weeks, she checked in with her body to see what she wanted to eat and realized, "Wow, mac and cheese doesn't

sound good right now!" She had habituated to it. She still allowed it to be an option for meals, but she found that, after the first few weeks of eating a lot of it, she rarely wanted it. When she did choose to eat it, she was usually able to stop at the point of comfortable fullness, without exerting any control. To this day, several years later, she continues to keep mac and cheese stocked in her pantry to make sure it is always allowed and available.

I know you're probably thinking something to the effect of, "But if I allow myself to eat *<insert commonly demonized "junk" foods>* whenever I want, I'd just eat it all the time." Look, I know this *feels* like the truth, and likely it would be if you still have a dieting mindset. But if you start to shift your mindset from the binary of dieting, restriction, and scarcity to the spectrum of abundance and allowance, then food habituation can happen, and the deprivation-binge pendulum can stop. Now this process, which I'll discuss more in Chapter 9, is not easy, but it is possible. Food habituation has been studied with all types of food, including those that most people consider "binge" foods, such as pizza, potato chips, and chocolate. When a certain food becomes familiar and is not kept off-limits, and you know you can eat it whenever you want, it becomes less compelling. You get used to knowing it will be there today, tomorrow, and the next day, and you actually end up eating it less often. It also gives you the space to eat and enjoy the food without scarcity thoughts like, "I better enjoy this now; starting tomorrow, it's back to eating clean." Remember, thoughts like that end up triggering the diet-binge pendulum.

Interestingly enough, we see very similar eating behaviors between dieters and people who suffer from food insecurity, those who don't have consistent access to affordable, nutritious food. Several studies have shown that people with food insecurity have an increased likelihood of eating disorders and binge-eating behaviors.[33] This is another example of our bodies trying to protect us from famine, whether it's due to a diet or socioeconomic issues and lack of access to food. It also goes to show that the myth of eating disorders only affecting wealthy women is false.

What About Food Addiction?

If I had a nickel for every time I've heard someone say they're addicted to food (sugar in particular), I'd be rich. People regularly toss around statements like, "Once I start eating ice cream, I can't stop," or, "If I even open a bag of cookies, I'm a goner." Maybe you have even uttered something similar yourself.

The idea of food addiction has been around for a while. (In 1960, Overeaters Anonymous started with the premise of helping people who suffered from addictive behavior with food.[34] Spoiler: OA is a diet.) There is even a food addiction screening scale, which was created by adapting drug and alcohol addiction screening tools. There is a lot that is wrong with this, not the least of which is the fact that we can abstain from drugs and alcohol and still survive just fine, but there is no possible way that we can live without food.[35]

Nowadays, ever since carbs, sugar, and processed foods have become demonized, it's common to hear people complain about their "sugar addiction." And yes, technically we can live without some types of sugar (though really, who would want to?), so many people who try to cut out sugar also try to restrict carbs, something that our bodies do need.

When people describe feeling "addicted" to food, what they are usually describing is a mix of intense cravings, a feeling of being out of control around food, and frequent overeating or bingeing on certain highly palatable foods. The experience of being out of control around food is a very real one, and the language of addiction ("this is a biological drive that I can't control") fits with this feeling. But that does not mean that food, or sugar, addiction is real, even if it *feels* real. There has been no evidence that food has a pharmacological effect on the brain the way drugs do. In fact, there is little to no evidence to support sugar (or food) addiction in human or animal studies.

What the studies have shown is that addiction-like behaviors occurred only when people had their sugar intake restricted or limited. As the authors of the review state, "These behaviours likely arise from intermittent access to sweet tasting or highly palatable foods, not the neurochemical effects of sugar."[36] This is the pendulum swing again: When you cut out sugar, you end up wanting it more; and when you finally eat it, you feel out of control and

end up bingeing. There is no proof that food itself is addictive; and when you look at the food addiction screening tool questions, it's quite possible that what they are actually screening for is disordered eating behavior.

Animal studies corroborate these findings. Rats that only have intermittent access to highly palatable foods end up developing compulsive eating behaviors. But the rats that have continued access to the same foods don't show any addictive-like behaviors.[37] So it's the uncertainty of when you'll be able to get the food (or sugar) again that makes these compulsive eating behaviors occur, not a true physical addiction.[38]

Then there is the "but sugar lights up the same brain pathways as drugs" argument. Well, yes, sugar does light up those same pathways and increases the release of dopamine, which makes us feel good. But do you want to know what else lights up those same pathways? Music. Smiling faces. Winning a prize. Finding something funny. Being in love. All of these pleasant and enjoyable events activate the same pathways, but this doesn't mean we are addicted to them.

Not only is there limited research on food and sugar addiction but the research that does exist doesn't account for restricted eating patterns (like diets and dieting behaviors). And given what we see from the research—that intermittent access to food causes more addictive-like behaviors—we can safely assume if you have dieted, you're going to feel that compulsive eating tendency. This doesn't mean that you are addicted to food or that you need to abstain from highly palatable foods, like those high in fat or sugar. It means that you need to stop dieting.