

What are Your Food Rules?

No one begins with a list of food rules carved in stone, but rather these rules develop slowly over time, based on our experiences and our environment. Here are some questions that will help you uncover some food rule you may have. Check any that may apply to you.

- Do you count calories, carbs, grams of fat or points?
- Do calories guide you in deciding how much to eat?
- Do you feel “*healthy eating*” means eating perfectly?
- Do you have any rules about when it’s okay (or not okay) to eat, based on the time of day?
- When it comes to snacking, do you have any rules?
- Are there any foods that you try to avoid?
- Do you have any rules about eating a meal or a certain food, if you don’t know the nutritional content?
- If other people are present, does this impact your eating?
- Do you check what or how much other people around you are eating?
- What food rules do you have relating to beverages?
- On days that you exercise, do you have different rules about eating?
- Do you have rules about eating carbohydrates like bread, pasta, cereals, etc.
- Do you have rules about sugar and/or sweets?
- Are there any foods that you eat, that you weigh or measure?
- Are there any foods that you feel are “safe” to eat?

What Food Rules or Expectations Did Your Family Have?

One of the most powerful influences on your belief system are the rules that were enforced when you were a child or teen. These food rules may have been created and enforced by well-meaning parents, out of love with your best interest at heart. But, depending on how rigidly these family food rules were enforced, they may have had a lasting impact. Reflect on the list below and check any that may have been food rules in your family when you were growing up.

- In terms of family meals, did your parents have any rigid rules?
- Was cleaning your plate an expectation?
- Was snacking ok, or were there rules you had to follow? (e.g. time of day, type of foods, quantity, etc.)
- Were there any rules about sweets and desserts?
- Were there any foods that were restricted or forbidden?
- When no one was around, did you ever sneak food?
- At parties did you feel excited to have treats when your parents weren't there?
- Did you ever feel any pressure about your body shape or size?
- Were the rules and expectations your parents set out around food different for you, compared to the rules they had set for themselves?
- Did you ever receive mixed messages about food and eating? For example, if you were told to not to eat too much sometimes, but then expected to clean your plate at meals?
- In terms of exercise, were there any rules when you were growing up?
- Did anyone in your family diet or weigh themselves?
- Did anyone in your family criticize their own body?
- Did anyone in your family monitoring your weight?
- Were you ever put on a diet as a child or teen?

Your Beliefs Relating to Food and Your Body

In the previous exercise you identified some of your food rules, and rules your family may have followed when you were growing up. Now, let's dig in and see what beliefs may be behind some of these food rules. Below is a list of belief related to food and your body. Reflect carefully on the list, and check any that you may align with your beliefs.

- Protein foods are the healthiest foods to eat.
- High fat foods are fattening and will make you gain weight.
- Carbohydrates like breads and pasta are fattening, and should be avoided.
- You should try to avoid foods that contain white flour and sugar.
- Gluten is not good for you. Everyone should try to avoid it.
- If you are overweight, you must lose weight in order to be healthy.
- Dieting is the most effective way to lose weight.
- Eating in the evenings leads to weight gain.
- Thin is the ideal body type.
- Weighing myself regularly is the best way to see if you are on the right track.

What other beliefs do you hold about food and your body?

Challenging Limiting Beliefs

Beliefs grow from our experiences and are shaped by our environment. If you grew up in an environment where people focused on body weight and size, these experiences have influenced your belief system. For example, a parent who made negative comments about their body, frequently weighed themselves, talked about dieting, or criticized someone else's appearance or eating habits. Experiences such as these shape your attitudes and beliefs about food and how you feel about your own body.

Take a few moments to reflect on the origin of your own beliefs about food and your body. What people or experiences have had an impact on you?

Our belief system helps us understand how the world works, and influences our thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Thoughts and rules originating from the voice of the food police are often *cognitive distortion*. This means that, while these thoughts may be very convincing... these statements are untrue and there is little or no evidence to back them up.

Here are a few examples of cognitive distortion. Work your way through the list below and reflect on each statement. Check off any statements that may align with some of your own views.

- I should avoid eating carbohydrates as much as possible, even if I am craving them.
- I know that fruits and vegetables contain carbs, these are good carbs. But I should avoid other types of carbs like bread and pasta.
- I will never be healthy unless I can find a way to lose weight.
- I just can't stick to a diet. I have no willpower.
- Maybe there is another diet out there that could work for me.
- Thin people are happier.

Can you think of any other exaggerated thoughts? Make a list of any that come to mind.

How to Challenge the Food Police

Now that you have begun to identify some *food police thoughts* of your own, let's begin to challenge some of these thoughts. There are 2 main ways in which you can challenge food police thoughts. The first way we will discuss is through cognitive behavioural therapy. This method focuses on evaluating and reframing your thoughts, if they are faulty. Re-framing unreasonable thoughts, will directly impacts your behaviour. The table below maps out the process in 4 steps.

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| STEP 1 Notice (<i>faulty thought</i>) | Simply notice your thoughts as they arise, with curious awareness. Try not to attach a story line or judgement to these thoughts, just notice them. |
| STEP 2 Ask | When I followed this rule in the past, how did I feel? Is this a reasonable expectation to set for myself? Is there any scientific evidence to back this up? Is this thought helping or harming my progress? |
| STEP 3 Reframe | Reflect on your past experience and ask, how has this way of thinking been working for me? Has it served me well? Has it brought about any real benefit? |
| STEP 4 Reflection | Based on your past experiences and new knowledge you have acquired, re-frame the thought with a retort that challenges this old way of thinking. Replace it with something more helpful, self-compassionate and productive. |

Example 1

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| Notice <i>(faulty thought)</i> | I need to lose weight to be healthy. |
| Ask | In the past when I only focused on weight loss to improve my health, how did I feel? Is this a reasonable expectation? Is there any evidence to confirm that this is the best way forward? |
| Re-frame | Dieting only helped me lose weight in the short term, but in the end I always re-gained what I lost. Focusing only on my weight has eroded my self-confidence, blunted my metabolism and made me feel like I just couldn't trust myself around food. |
| Reflection | Dieting didn't work for me, and that's ok because it doesn't work for anyone else either. My health cannot be measured by a number on the scale. I am going to focus on becoming more active, developing healthier coping mechanisms and eating in a way that honours my physical, emotional and mental well-being. |

Example 2

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| Notice <i>(faulty thought)</i> | I know that fruits and vegetables contain carbohydrates, these are good carbs. I can eat good carbs. Foods like bread, pasta and grains also contain carbs, but these are bad carbs...I should avoid those. |
| Ask | In the past when I allowed myself to eat fruits and vegetables as my only source of carbohydrates, how did I feel? |
| Re-frame | When fruits and vegetables have been my only source of carbohydrates in the past, I felt low on energy. I had difficulty concentrating and often felt hungry, even shortly after eating a meal. |
| Reflection | Now that I am including bread, pasta or grains with my meals, I feel like I can think clearly. My meals are more satisfying. Eating only fruits and vegetables, just left me feeling hungry and irritable. That doesn't work for me. |

Challenging the Food Police

Practice Exercise

Now it's your turn. Write down a re-occurring thought you have about eating or your body and work through the 4 steps of reframing this thought.

Step 1: Notice: *Write down a common food police thought you have. Try not to attach a story line or judgement to it, just write it down.*

Step 2: Ask: *When I followed this rule in the past, how did I feel? Is this a reasonable expectation to set for myself? Is there any scientific evidence to back this up? Has this thought been helping or harming my progress?*

Step 3: Reframe: Think back over your past experience and ask, how has this way of thinking been working for me? Has it served me well? Has it brought about any real benefit?

Step 4: Reflection: *Based on your past experiences and new knowledge you have acquired, re-frame this thought with a retort that challenges this old way of thinking. Replace it with something more helpful, self-compassionate and productive.*

Stick to Just the Facts

Another way to challenge food police thoughts (*cognitive distortion*) is to simply reframe them based on factual information. Here's an example:

Distorted thought: *I hate being overweight. I am never going to feel ok about my body unless I can lose weight.*

Re-frame with factual statement: *There are lots of people who live in larger bodies, who are strong, healthy, and happy.*

Practice Re-Framing Your Distorted Thoughts with Facts

Identify some thoughts that you may have that could be changed by simply re-framing these thoughts based on the facts.

Distorted thought:

Re-frame with factual information that counters this distorted thought.

Our thoughts have a powerful impact our feelings

Our belief system informs our thoughts, and thoughts have a powerful impact on how we feel. Negative thoughts have a profound impact on our overall wellbeing. By re-framing negative/ judgemental thoughts, you can change how you feel.

Here's an example:

Negative/ Judgemental Thought: *I told myself no more potato chips, and now I have just eaten an entire bag of chips! I am so mad at myself. I am always overeating.*

How did reading this negative statement make you feel? _____

Reframe as a Positive Statement: *When I give myself full permission to eat what I desire, I eat a reasonable amount of potato chips.*

How did reading this positive statement make you feel? _____

Negative thoughts can have a profound impact on your overall well-being. The more you challenge and reframe negative thoughts, replacing them with positive/ constructive thoughts, the better you will feel.

Expressing gratitude is another powerful way to shift negative self-talk to a more productive and positive outlook. Here's an example:

Negative/Judgemental thought: *I am pathetic. I planned to exercise every day this week and I didn't get to my gentle yoga class even once.*

Re-frame with gratitude:

I am so blessed to have my health and a strong body that allows me to do the things I enjoy.

I am so proud of myself for discovering that I enjoy gentle yoga. I am not doing it every day, but I am working on it. I am amazing!

Make your own list of things you feel grateful for. Be as specific as possible. How does seeing the world with a spirit of gratitude affect you?
