



# IS EMOTIONAL EATING SABOTAGING YOUR EFFORTS TO EAT HEALTHIER?

BY CASSIE CHRISTOPHER, MS RD



# OBJECTIVES

- Define emotional eating and describe how it commonly shows up.
- Understand the impact of emotional eating on emotional resilience and health.
- Describe how common solutions for eating struggles end up making emotional eating worse.
- Understand the steps needed to heal emotional eating and make consistently healthy eating choices.



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# SCOPE OF THIS PRESENTATION

- Not a therapist, will present research from field of psychology.
- Eating Disorders (ED) outside scope
  - Some overlap between topics (especially with Binge Eating Disorder) but we are focused on behavior that doesn't meet the intensity/duration to be diagnosed as an eating disorder.
  - For Eating Disorder Support: [National Association of Eating Disorders](#)





# WHAT IS EMOTIONAL EATING?

AND HOW DO YOU KNOW  
YOU'RE DOING IT?





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## 2 FACES OF EMOTIONAL EATING

1. Using food to numb or repress emotions (positive or negative).
2. Using food as a primary source of joy, reward, pleasure.

... we emotionally eat because it works to make us feel better.



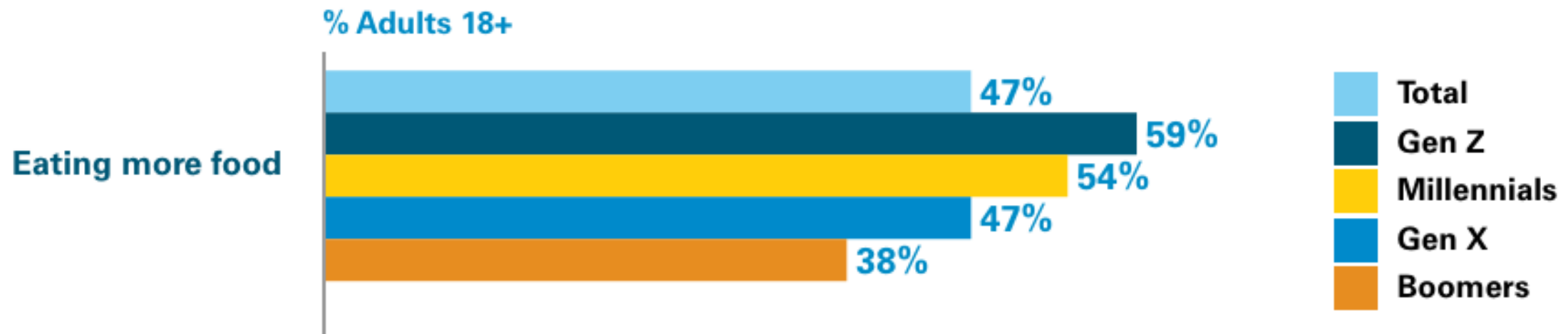
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# IN REAL LIFE...

- 
- Eating for comfort “food is better than Xanax”
  - Eating to reward yourself
  - Boredom eating
  - Eating to stay awake
  - Eating when stressed or angry
  - Sneaking or hiding food
  - Feel guilt or shame after eating
  - Eating for “me time”
  - Eating to zone out or disconnect

# EMOTIONAL EATING ON THE RISE

- Studies in the [UK](#), [Italy](#), [Norway](#), [Brazil](#) all indicated increased emotional eating due to COVID-19
- [Researchers](#) theorize the link between depression, [chronic stress](#) and obesity is emotional eating



Source: [BlueCross BlueShield](#)





# IMPACT OF EMOTIONAL EATING ON HEALTH

- **Chronic Emotional Eating = Poorer health**
  - Emotional repression is linked to many health concerns and reduced quality of life (Table I)
  - Processed food consumption tied [to an increased risk of chronic disease](#)
- **Mental Health**
  - Exacerbate mental health issues through weight stigma, guilt/shame with eating
  - Can lead to feeling mentally exhausted by and simultaneously obsessed with food

Table I: Consequences of Emotional Repression

Specialty	Complaint/Disorder
Cardiology	Hypertension, Chest Pain, Palpitations
Dermatology	Psoriasis, Dermatitis, Itching
Endocrinology	Fatigue, Obesity, Thyroid Dysfunction
Gastroenterology	Irritable Bowel Syndrome, Dyspepsia, Abdominal Pain
Internal Medicine	Weakness, Pain, Fatigue
Neurology	Conversion, Paralysis, Headache, Dizziness, Pseudo-
Gynecology	Pelvic Pain, Sexual Dysfunction, Infertility
Ophthalmology	Visual Blurring, Tunnel Vision, Blindness
Respirology	Shortness Of Breath, Choking Spells, Chest Pain
Rheumatology	Fibromyalgia, Fatigue, Chronic Pain
Surgery	Back Pain, Neck Pain, Abdominal Pain
Urology	Urethral Syndrome, Sexual Dysfunction

[Source: International Journal of Psychotherapy Practice and Research, "Consequences of Repression of Emotion: Physical Health, Mental Health and General Well Being", 2019](#)



# RESILIENCE

Resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands.

A number of factors contribute to how well people adapt to adversities, predominant among them:

- the ways in which individuals view and engage with the world
- the availability and quality of social resources
- specific coping strategies

Psychological research demonstrates that the resources and skills associated with more positive adaptation (i.e., greater resilience) can be cultivated and practiced.

From [APA Dictionary of Psychology](#)

## HIGHER LEVELS OF RESILIENCE ARE ASSOCIATED WITH:



Healthier eating



More physical  
activity



Better sleep



Moderate alcohol  
intake

# IMPACT OF EMOTIONAL EATING ON RESILIENCE

Short term: Emotional eating works!  
More resilience!

- The body is experiencing difficult emotions and stress, but the brain is able to ignore them.
- ([2007. Does Repressive Coping Promote Resilience? Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.](#))

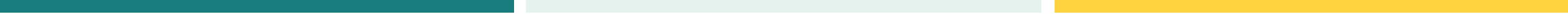
Long term: Burnout

- When a stressful situation exceeds the amount of resilience available to cope.
- Leads to exhaustion, anxiety, depression.
- ([2020. Burnout by Nagoski & Nagoski](#))

BURNOUT: THE SECRET TO  
UNLOCKING THE STRESS  
CYCLE BY AMELIA AND  
EMILY NAGOSKI

“IN SHORT, EMOTIONS ARE  
TUNNELS. IF YOU GO ALL THE  
WAY THROUGH THEM, YOU GET  
TO THE LIGHT AT THE END.  
EXHAUSTION HAPPENS WHEN  
WE GET STUCK IN AN  
EMOTION.”





“MALADAPTIVE COPING MODES APPEAR TO MAKE INDEPENDENT CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE RISK OF EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION (AKA BURNOUT) AND EFFORTS TO REDUCE BURNOUT IN PSYCHOLOGISTS SHOULD FOCUS DUALY ON INCREASING RESILIENCE-BUILDING PRACTICES AND DECREASING MALADAPTIVE COPING.”

[2021. THE INFLUENCE OF MALADAPTIVE COPING MODES, RESILIENCE, AND JOB DEMANDS ON EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION IN PSYCHOLOGISTS. CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY. SMOUT ET AL.](#)





EMOTIONAL EATING (A FORM OF “MALADAPTIVE COPING”) CAN LEAD TO BURNOUT.  
TO HEAL:

1. “INCREASE RESILIENCE-BUILDING PRACTICES”
2. “DECREASING MALADAPTIVE COPING”

[-2021.THE INFLUENCE OF MALADAPTIVE COPING MODES, RESILIENCE, AND JOB DEMANDS ON EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION IN PSYCHOLOGISTS. CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY. SMOUT ET AL.](#)





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WHAT NOT  
TO DO:

ALL OR  
NOTHING  
DIETING

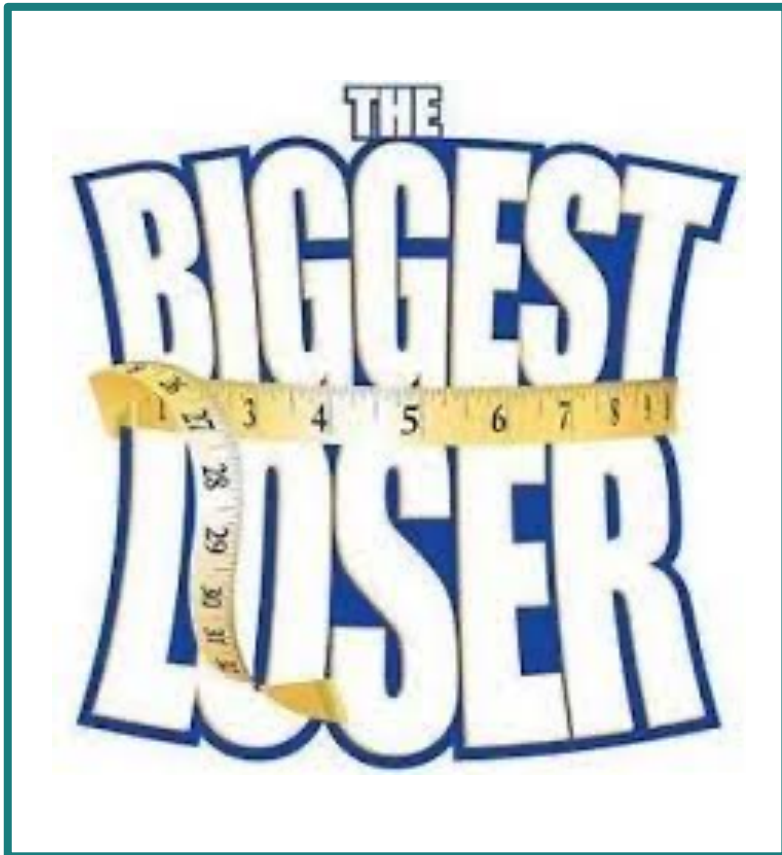


**80-95% OF DIETS FAIL**





# WHY DIETS FAIL



- Metabolism slows down, appetite increases
  - Biggest Loser = [New York Times Article](#)
- All or Nothing Dieting is not sustainable

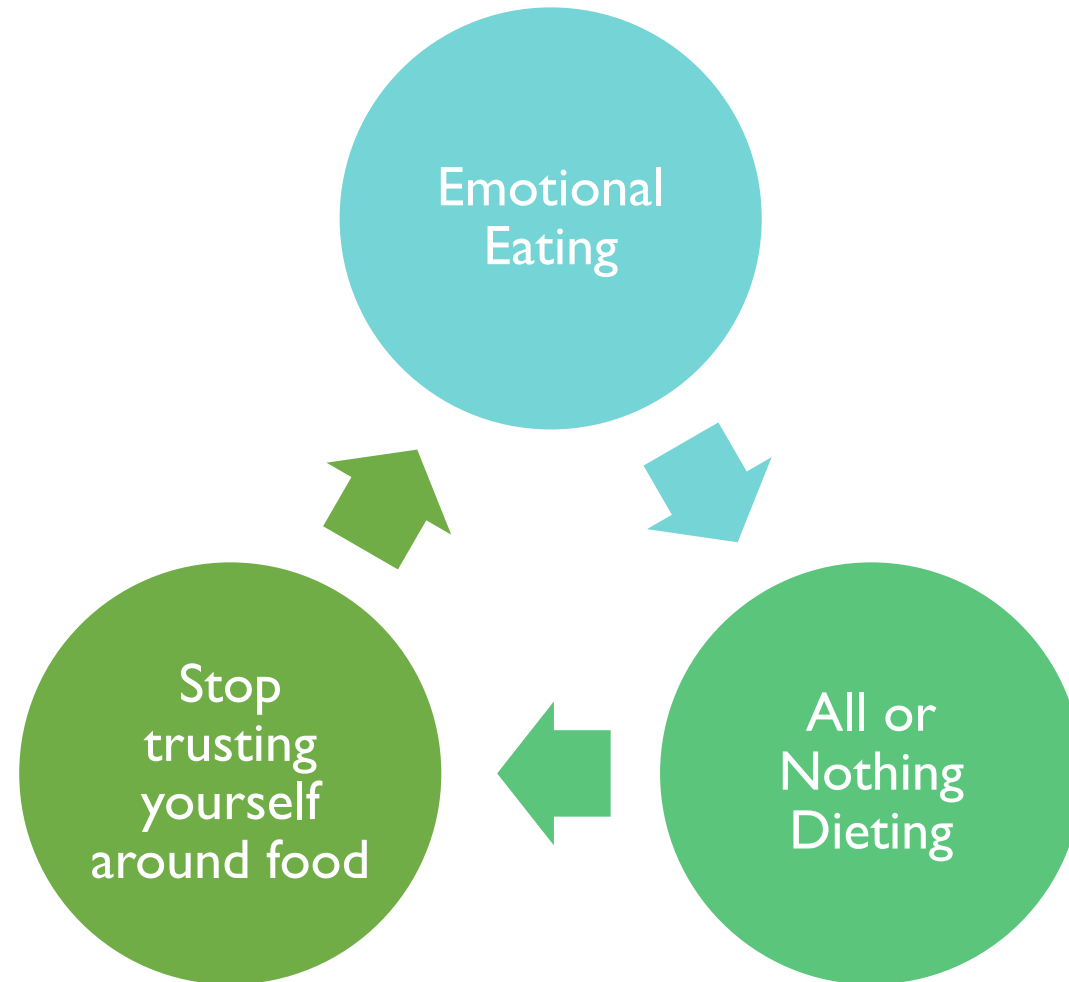


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## DIETS CAUSE MORE EMOTIONAL EATING

- Forbidden Fruit Phenomenon
  - ([2001. Int J Eat Disord. Forbidden fruit. Mann & Ward](#)).
- Disconnected from emotional feelings:
  - Repeated “nothing” cycles prime the brain for emotional eating
- Disconnected from the body:
  - Decreased hunger and satiety signaling
- End-result: People stop trusting themselves around food.

# A VISCOUS CYCLE





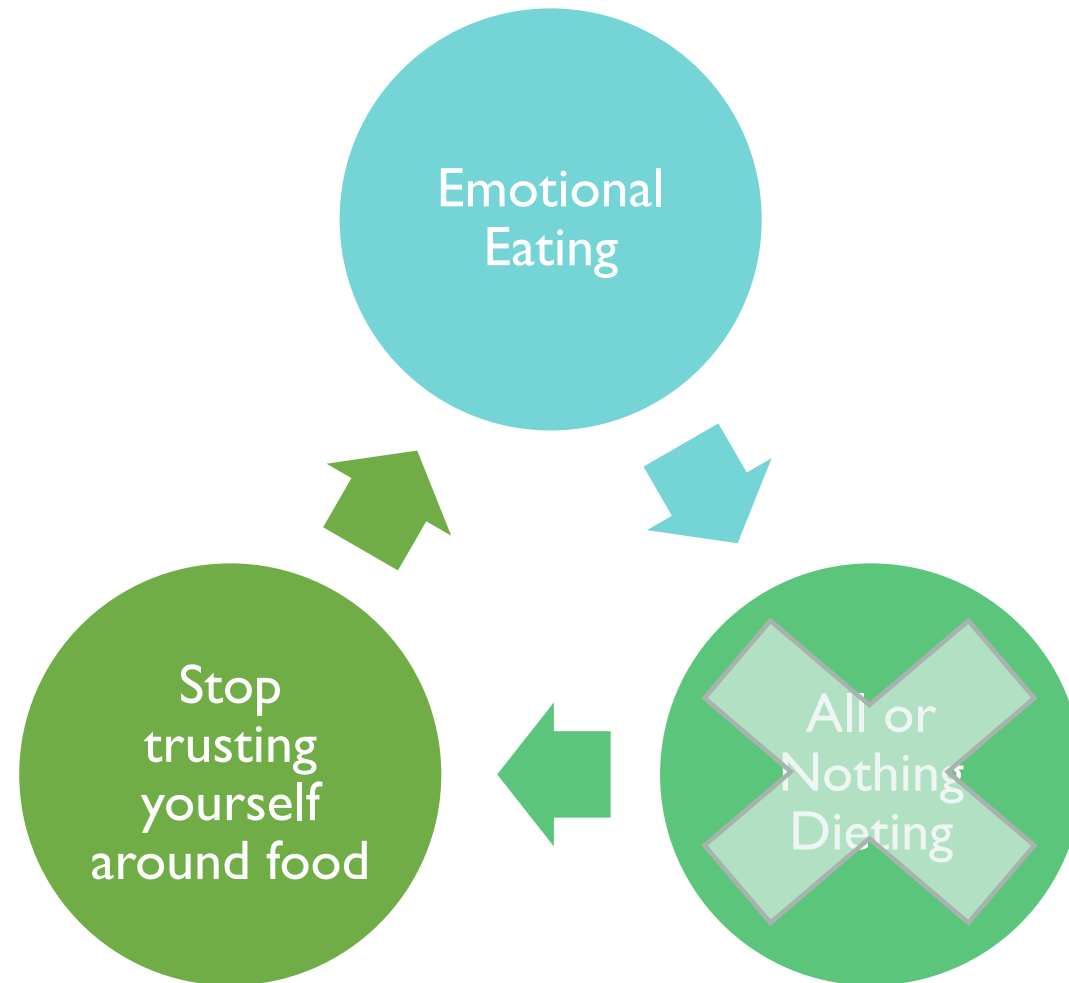


IF DIETING DOESN'T WORK, WHAT DOES?

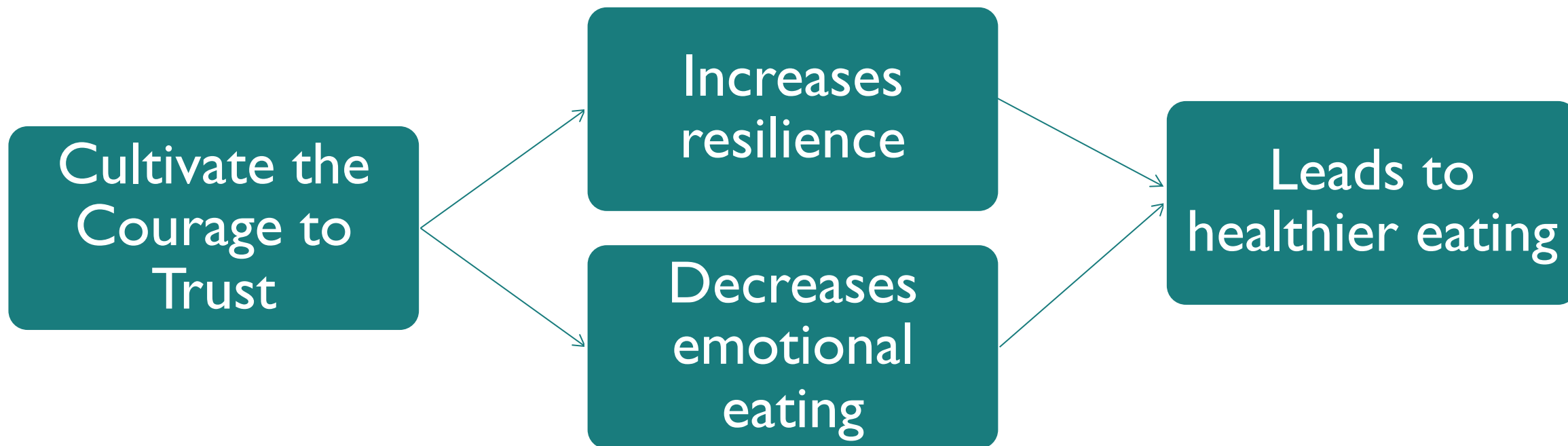


# A VISCOUS CYCLE

Have to solve this issue before you can heal emotional eating, increase resiliency and make consistently healthy eating choices



# THE IMPACT OF TRUSTING YOURSELF AROUND FOOD





Food isn't the problem (and neither are you).



You can hear and respond to the cues your body is giving you, instead of eating to numb or restricting for control.



You can mindfully indulge AND consistently make nourishing choices.



You are worthy of care and love, just as you are, even if/while pursuing weight loss.

COURAGE TO TRUST THAT...

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IT'S NOT YOUR  
FAULT.

IF YOU ARE  
STRUGGLING WITH  
EMOTIONAL EATING,  
AND/OR ALL OR  
NOTHING DIETING  
HASN'T WORKED  
FOR YOU,  
RECOGNIZE THERE IS  
NOTHING WRONG  
WITH YOU.



HOW DO YOU DEVELOP THE COURAGE TO TRUST?



# COURAGE TO TRUST METHOD



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# CALMING THE NERVOUS SYSTEM



# CALM THE NERVOUS SYSTEM



- Dieting raises psychological and biological stress\_levels
  - Chronic dieting can lead to PTSD-like symptoms
  - Link between trauma and eating issues is well established
- Choosing less healthy foods is correlated with higher stress levels
  - Chicken or the egg?
- Emotional eating is often experienced as intense urges to eat (unrelated to physical hunger) similar to feelings of panic or anxiety.
  - Practical application: Next time you feel an intense desire to eat something, scan your body. Are you physically hungry? If not, what are you feeling?

[2010.American Psychosomatic Society. Low Calorie Dieting Increases Cortisol.](#)

[2013. Minerva Endocrinol. Stress and Eating Behaviors.](#)

2022.Virtual Certificate of Training in Obesity. Live presentation: Delivering Trauma-Informed Counseling. CDR.



# TIP #1



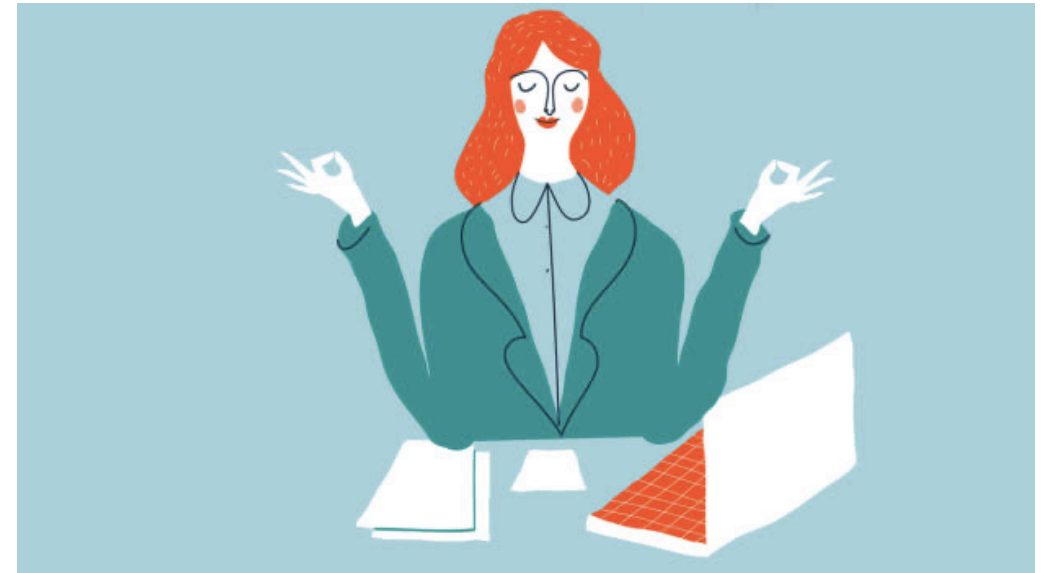
- Eat regularly
  - Balance of protein + fiber
  - Starting in the morning and throughout the day



## TIP #2



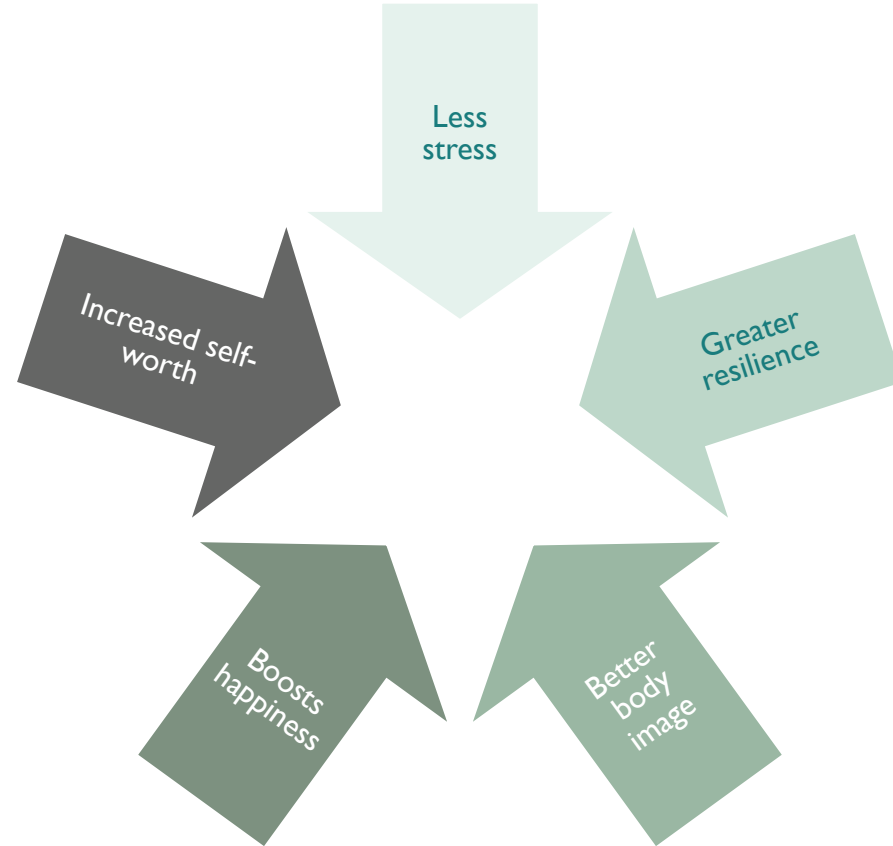
- **Stress Management**
  - Do what works for you
  - Check your benefits – EAP, mental health resources
  - Great book: “Burnout” by Nagoski’s (note: geared towards women, but applicable to all)



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# SELF-COMPASSION





## BENEFITS OF SELF-COMPASSION

## HOW-TO



Self-Kindness

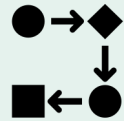


Validating,  
accepting, holding  
space for your  
feelings and  
suffering





# SELF- COMPASSION ALLOWS YOU TO...



Build momentum on small wins, rather than perceiving your actions as failures.



Rather than resorting back to old habits when behavior change isn't going well, you can problem-solve with non-judgmental curiosity.



Have greater feelings of wellbeing, which reduces your need to use food to cope.

# SELF- COMPASSION PRACTICE

1. Put your hand on your heart and say, “May I be kind”
2. Write yourself a letter as if you were addressing a beloved friend
3. Give yourself permission to be imperfect (the antidote to all or nothing)
4. Notice your thoughts about yourself when you mess up, are they critical? Would you say these things to a friend?
5. See more self-compassion practices at [self-compassion.org](http://self-compassion.org)

# LISTENING TO SELF



# LISTENING TO SELF



- Identifying and caring for physical and emotional needs apart from indulgent eating.
- The goal is to take such good care of yourself that the cravings never even surface.



# HOW TO LISTEN TO YOURSELF

## In the moment...

- Scan your body to discover where you may notice feeling or sensation.
- Ask yourself: what is it that you need in this moment?
  - Soothing panic?
  - Comfort?
  - Or something else?

## After an eating event...

- Debrief:
  - What thoughts, events, feelings, and behaviors preceded the eating incident?
  - Ask the question: How was eating benefiting me in that moment?



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HEALTH  
CHANGE  
WITHOUT  
DIETING



## FOCUS ON...

- Abundance rather than restriction.
- Evidence-based healthy behaviors that work for your lifestyle.
- Measure success based on factors within your control (# of steps vs. # of pounds).
- “There is joy and meaning in the journey.”



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YOU CAN DO  
THIS!

CHOOSE 1 STRATEGY TO IMPLEMENT  
BASED ON TODAY'S CONVERSATION

