

**RECOVERY SESSION:**

# DEALING WITH DIET CULTURE

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**BODY BRAVE**  
recovery for every body

## DISCLAIMER

This resource is a living document and is open to change. It was created by students from within the Body Brave community and may not be fully representative of the spectrum of experience. If you have any suggestions to improve this resource or lived experiences that you don't see represented here, please email us at [info@bodybrave.ca](mailto:info@bodybrave.ca).

## WHAT IS DIET CULTURE?

Diet culture isn't about any one specific diet, but about how our culture navigates the phenomenon of dieting. It is a culture that celebrates thinness, views weight loss as evidence of willpower, and promotes the idea that there is a universal "right way" to eat. It perpetuates the notion that there is one narrow definition of a healthy body and how to achieve that healthy body. This narrative makes it easy to fall into any number of disordered eating behaviours in the pursuit of a socially praised body, or even under the guise of health and wellness. Dr. Christy Harrison cautions people against falling into the trap of a "Wellness Diet" that focuses on labelling, moralizing, and eliminating foods as a means to "detox" or "cleanse" the body.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of "diet" as a noun is simply "the kinds of food that a person, animal, or community habitually eats." However, diet culture tends to use the definition of "diet" as a verb: "to restrict oneself to small amounts or special kinds of food in order to lose weight." The keyword in this definition is "restrict". Restriction is heavily tied to eating disorders of all kinds since physically or mentally restricting foods can perpetuate binge-type behaviors, or can prolong restrictive behaviours. Restricting foods, even for health or medical reasons, can lead to fixations and preoccupations with food that may spiral into disordered eating patterns.

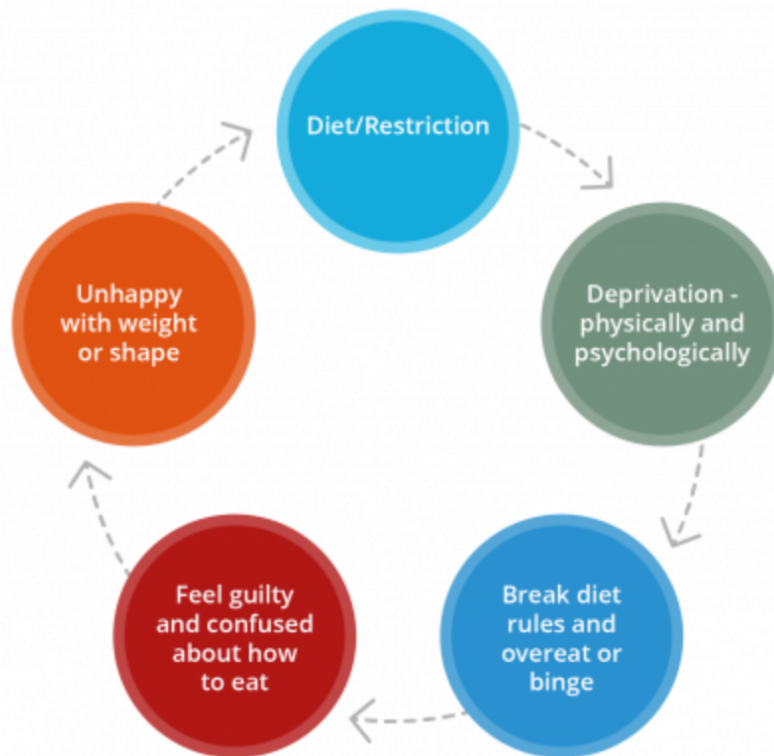
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[What Is Diet Culture? – Christy Harrison](#)

[How to Avoid Falling for The Wellness Diet – Christy Harrison](#)

[13 Experts Explain Why Diets Don't Work And What To Do Instead](#)

## DIET CYCLING



Diet cycling involves five stages: diet/restrict foods, deprive oneself of these foods, break diet/eat restricted foods, experience negative feelings, and become unhappy with body/weight. Let's explore this further.

1. **Diet/Restrict Foods.** The individual limits foods by amount or type of food, or restricts whole food groups. This may not apply to distinct medical accommodations (e.g., restricting gluten for someone with celiac disease, or managing carbs/sugars for a diabetic).
2. **Deprivation.** Food intake is restricted, which can lead to physical symptoms, such as an increased appetite, cravings for the restricted foods, or a slowed metabolism. It may also lead to mental and emotional symptoms, like irritability, deprivation, or fatigue.
3. **Break diet rules and indulge in cravings.** The body and mind can no longer resist the restricted foods, and gives in to cravings. This may lead to the individual overeating or experiencing a bingeing episode.
4. **Experience negative thoughts/feelings.** The individual may experience feelings of dejection, disappointment, guilt, and shame. They may attribute their indulging in cravings to not having enough willpower or feel like a "failure".
5. **Become unhappy with physical appearance.** This binge episode and overeating may result in a change in their body or weight. This, combined with the negative thoughts and feelings, can result in them trying to "get back on track" or "do better", restarting the dieting/restriction stage.

## **DIET CULTURE MYTHS**

Diet culture is based on lying to us about what our diets should look like, and has moved the goalposts again and again. This can cause us to doubt ourselves and our bodies. Let's dispel some myths about diets and diet culture!

### ***Myth 1: Appearance is a good indicator of health, and being thin means you're healthy.***

You cannot make conclusions about anyone's health based on the way they look. Lifestyles that include "health-promoting behaviours", like meeting nutrient needs and moving your body, are encouraged for everyone, but health extends beyond diet or exercise - mental, emotional, and spiritual health are essential to the optimal functioning of our minds and bodies. People of all sizes can be healthy and unhealthy.

### ***Myth 2: You need to follow specific diet "rules" to lose weight or be healthy.***

You may have heard that carbs will make you gain weight, and you should go keto instead. You also may have heard that a high-carb, low-fat, low-protein diet is the way humans were meant to eat. You may have heard about combining certain foods or eating only at certain times of day.

The reality is that they keep inventing new diets because none of them work long-term or are sustainable! Even if we all ate the same and moved the same, our bodies would all be different. Work with your health team and reflect on what makes your individual body feel good since this will likely be different from what works for your friend or that one "fitness coach" on Instagram.

### ***Myth 3: There is no such thing as being "too healthy" and I should always strive to be as "healthy" as I possibly can.***

While it is lesser known, orthorexia is slowly gaining recognition as an eating disorder. This disorder involves obsession with healthy or "clean" eating, and preoccupation with trying to cleanse or detox the body with food or exercise. Mental health can be significantly impacted by typical practices associated with this disorder, like planning all activities around food or stressing over availability of approved foods.

Health is not something you owe to people, and you are worthy of love and respect regardless of "health".



## TIPS FOR AVOIDING DIET CULTURE

It can be difficult to get out of a diet culture mindset when it's baked into our everyday lives through media consumption and our language. As tricky as it can be, there are some ways that you can remove aspects of diet culture from your life, and from your mindset.

### **Find ways to connect with people that don't surround food.**

Food is such a central part of almost every single culture, and it can be easy to tie food to many life events - from celebrating to mourning - which can be difficult if food is triggering for you. Consider connecting with your loved ones over non-food related activities.

Some examples are going for a walk/hike, playing board games or cards, doing a craft, going thrift shopping, reading together, or going on an adventure.

### **Change your language = change your mindset.**

When you catch yourself using diet culture language, gently correct yourself to rewire your thinking on the subject. Try to avoid words that associate food with guilt or shame, using "fat" as a feeling, or commenting on yours or a loved one's physical appearance.

### **Educate your loved ones.**

It is very possible that your loved ones are using triggering diet culture rhetoric without realizing it, and would change it if their eyes were opened to it. Consider gently sharing your knowledge of diet culture and its linkage to eating disorders, if you're comfortable.

These tips were primarily sourced from *Diet Talk: How To Respond & What To Say*, by Colleen Christensen, RD.

### **★ Let's set a goal!**

*Choose one of the tips above and write a clear and specific goal that you can work on this week. For example: I will celebrate my next achievement by going to the arcade with a friend instead of going out to dinner.*

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## **Affirmations**

Practice these affirmations to shift negative thoughts to neutral thoughts. You can memorize them and say them to yourself, put them in a note on your phone, write them on a piece of paper and carry them in your pocket, or put them on a sticky note next to your mirror. Choose the ones that resonate with you and reach for them in moments of stress, anxiety, or low body image. These affirmations were partially sourced from [How I'm Using Affirmations to Help Reprogram My Relationships with Food and Exercise.](#)

*I can release myself from a diet mentality and any thoughts that do not serve me.*

*Food is not good or bad, and I am not good or bad for eating any foods.*

*I will engage in the movement that serves me and that I enjoy, and remove the movement that does not serve me, or that I dread.*

*I accept that this journey to recognize hunger and fullness takes time.*

*I chose to be gentle and kind to my body. I choose to celebrate my small and big wins.*

*I don't have to be exactly where I want to be. I can appreciate that I'm making progress on my journey and I'm not where I was.*

*In a culture obsessed with thinness, it's natural to have thoughts and desires about losing weight. That doesn't mean I need to fall back into another diet cycle.*

*I choose to work on the things that can be improved upon, like joyful movement, better balance, and intuitive eating.*

## FURTHER LEARNING

### Podcasts

**Food Psych with Christy Harrison** A podcast about intuitive eating, body image, and diet culture to help challenge restrictive dieting behaviors and learn some useful body-confidence strategies along the way.

**The Body Image Podcast with Corrine Dobbas, MS, RD** The Body Image Podcast is a podcast about body image and the many layers that go into making peace with our bodies. Like intuitive eating, self-compassion, mental health, self-care, body and size acceptance, embodiment, rejecting diet culture, and more.

**The Recovery Warrior Show** A podcast dedicated to boosting the emotional intelligence and resilience of people struggling with depression, anxiety and eating disorders.

### TED Talks

**Body Positivity or Body Obsession? Learning to See More & Be More | Lindsay Kite | TEDxSaltLakeCity**

**Eating Disorders from the Inside Out: Laura Hill at TEDxColumbus**

**Sandra Aamodt: Why dieting doesn't usually work**

**What is a healthy relationship with food? | Rhiannon Lambert | TEDxUniversityofEastAnglia**

### Reading

**Body Respect: What Conventional Health Books Get Wrong, Leave Out, and Just Plain Fail to Understand about Weight**

**Anti-Diet: Reclaim Your Time, Money, Well-Being and Happiness Through Intuitive Eating by Christy Harrison**

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