Nutrition Research Institute

THE SCIENCE BEHIND

Hunger, Fullness, and Emotional Eating

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Living F.R.E.E. Lab
Research Focused on Reducing Excessive Eating

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Living F.R.E.E. Lab

Research **F**ocused on **R**educing **E**xcessive **E**ating

The Living F.R.E.E. Lab is a research group focused on developing, implementing, and evaluating equitable interventions for those managing disordered eating and chronic disease.

OUR TEAM

Our team is composed of social workers, public health researchers, clinicians, community members, and students.

LEARN MORE

OUR WORK

We work hard to conduct research to improve eating behaviors.

LEARN MORE

PARTICIPATE

We are always looking for people to become involved in the work at Living F.R.E.E. Lab.

LEARN MORE



IT’S OKAY TO FEEL ALL YOUR EMOTIONS.



What is Emotional Eating?



Emotional Eating

- Definition: Emotional eating is when we eat in response to negative emotions, not because we are physically hungry

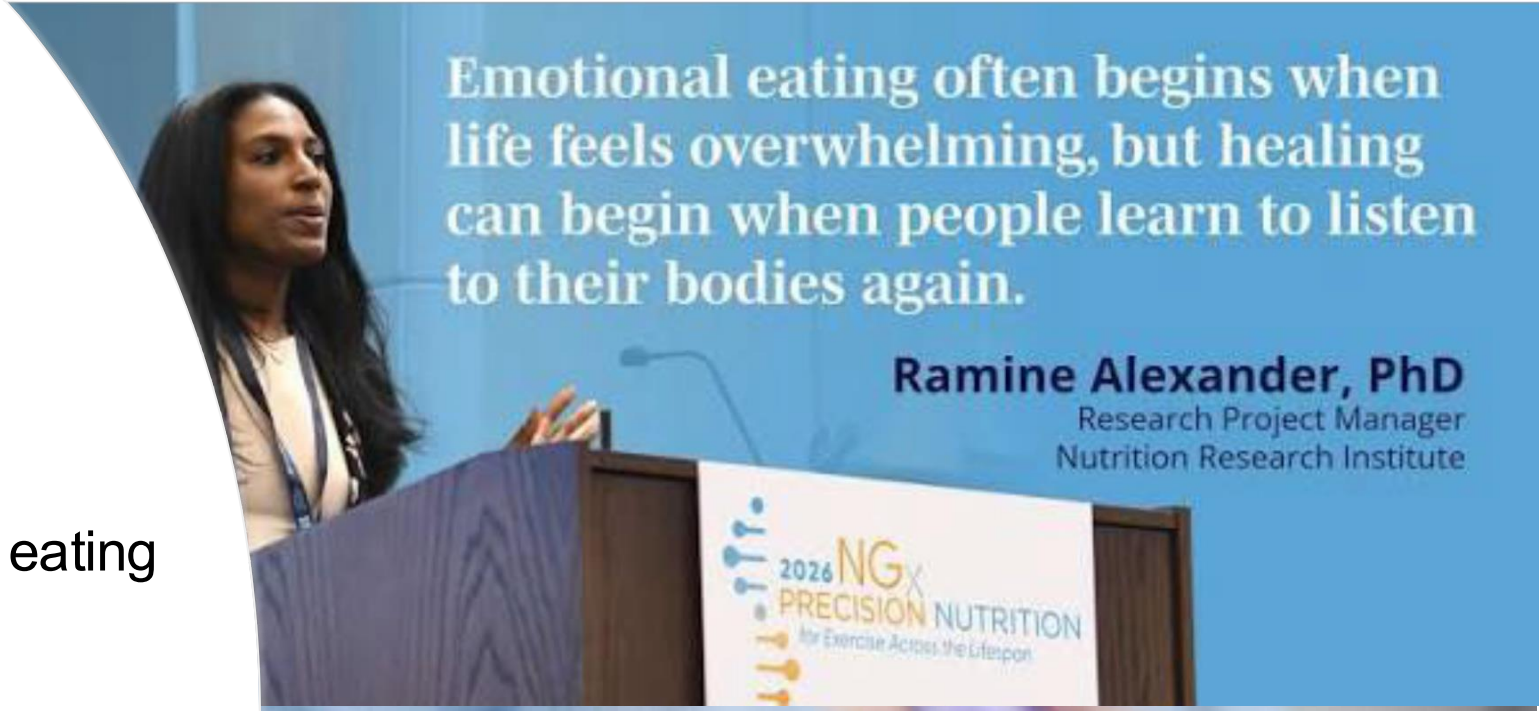
Dakanalis A, Mentzelou M, Papadopoulou SK, Papandreou D, Spanoudaki M, Vasios GK, Pavlidou E, Mantzorou M, Giaginis C. The Association of Emotional Eating with Overweight/Obesity, Depression, Anxiety/Stress, and Dietary Patterns: A Review of the Current Clinical Evidence. Nutrients. 2023 Feb 26;15(5):1173. doi: 10.3390/nu15051173. PMID: 36904172; PMCID: PMC10005347.

Cycle of Emotional Eating



You Are Not Alone

- Up to **38% of adults** report overeating or eating unhealthy foods to manage stress
- Almost **50%** of individuals stress-eat on a weekly basis





Dakanalis A, Mentzelou M, Papadopoulou SK, Papandreou D, Spanoudaki M, Vasios GK, Pavlidou E, Mantzorou M, Giaginis C. The Association of Emotional Eating with Overweight/Obesity, Depression, Anxiety/Stress, and Dietary Patterns: A Review of the Current Clinical Evidence. Nutrients. 2023 Feb 26;15(5):1173. doi: 10.3390/nu15051173. PMID: 36904172; PMCID: PMC10005347.

Chew, H. S. J., Soong, R. Y., Ang, W. H. D., Ngooi, J. W., Park, J., Yong, J. Q. Y. O., & Goh, Y. S. S. (2025). The global prevalence of emotional eating in overweight and obese populations: A systematic review and meta-analysis. British Journal of Psychology, 116, 484–498. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12768

Braden A, Ahlich E, Koball AM. Emotional Eating and Obesity: An Update and New Insights. Curr Obes Rep. 2025 Sep 29;14(1):70. doi: 10.1007/s13679-025-00661-9. PMID: 41021073; PMCID: PMC12479663.

Common Triggers for Emotional Eating

Food environments shape what food we buy and eat.

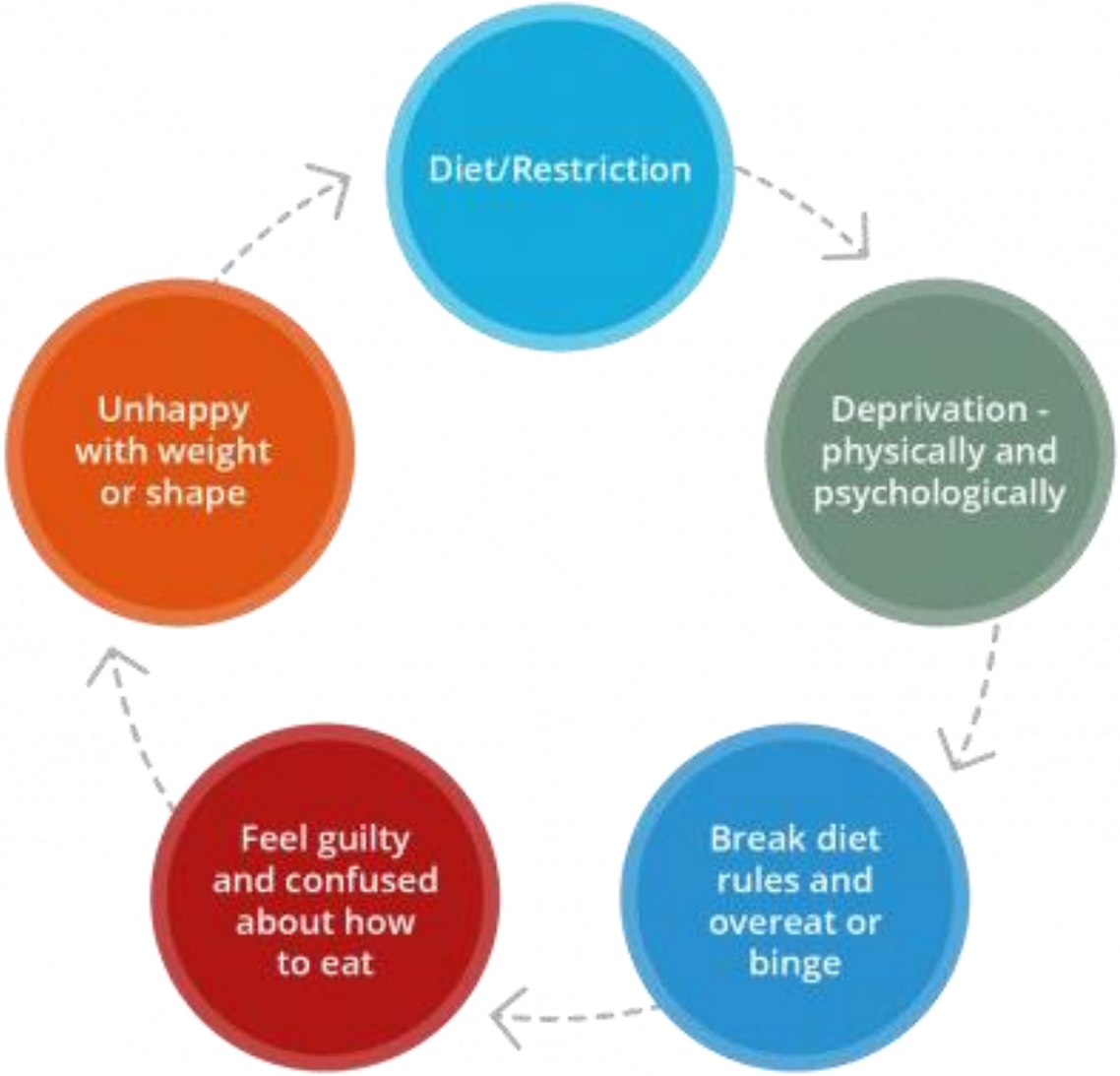


Over 60% of the modern American diet consists of ultra-processed foods.
A century ago, this was under 5%

Williams, A. M., Couch, C. A., Emmerich, S. D., & Ogburn, D. F. (2025). Ultra-processed Food Consumption in Youth and Adults: United States, August 2021–August 2023. In *NCHS Data Briefs [Internet]*. National Center for Health Statistics (US)

Lee JH, Duster M, Roberts T, Devinsky O. United States Dietary Trends Since 1800: Lack of Association Between Saturated Fatty Acid Consumption and Non-communicable Diseases. Front Nutr. 2022 Jan 13;8:748847. doi: 10.3389/fnut.2021.748847. Erratum in: Front Nutr. 2025 Dec 22;12:1635185. doi: 10.3389/fnut.2025.1635185. PMID: 35118102; PMCID: PMC8805510.

Disordered Eating Patterns



https://nedc.com.au/eating-disorders/eating-disorders-explained/disordered-eating-and-dieting/

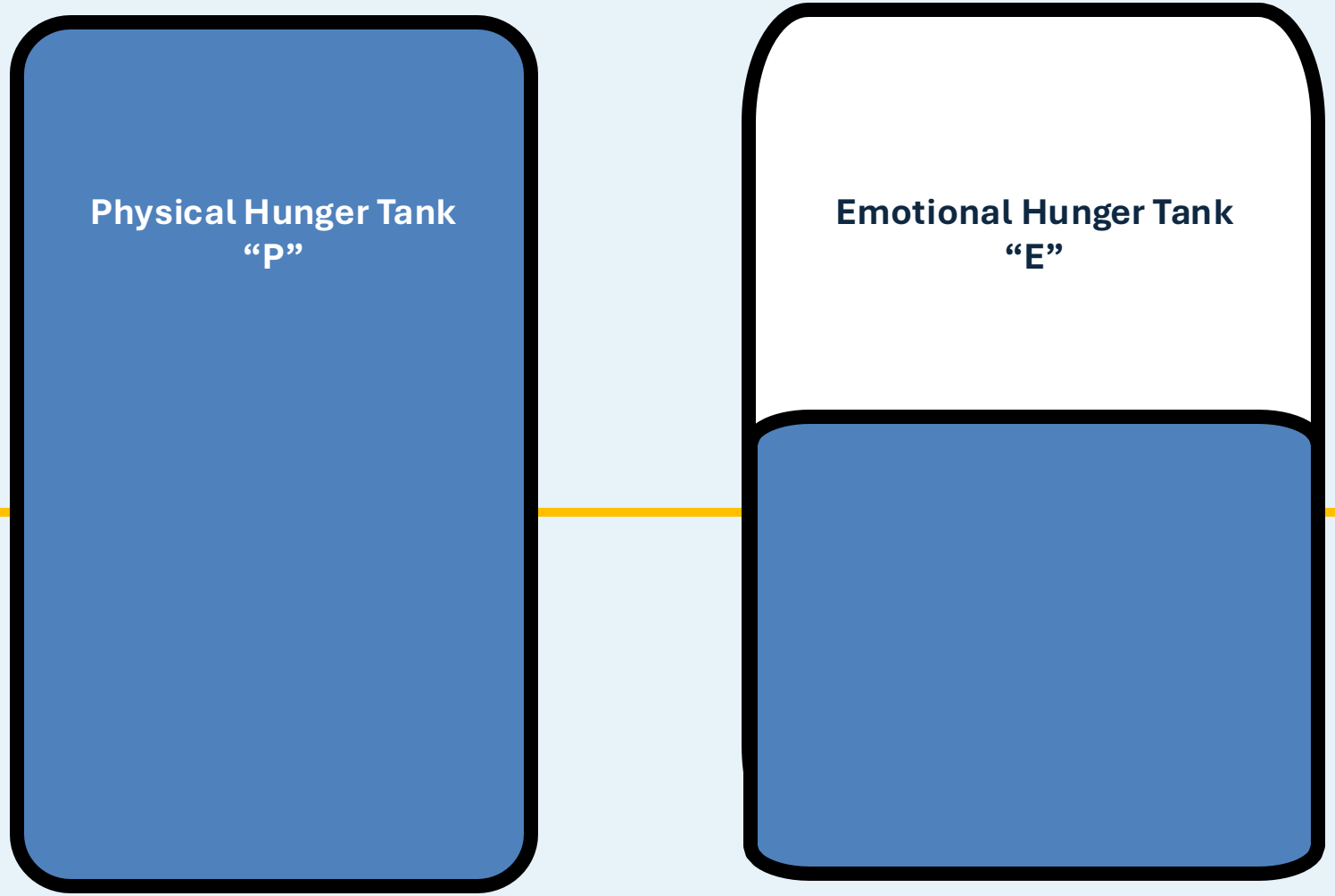


The Noise of Life

Why doesn’t food solve emotional hunger?

Physical vs Emotional Hunger

Emotional eating is an attempt to fulfill your emotional needs



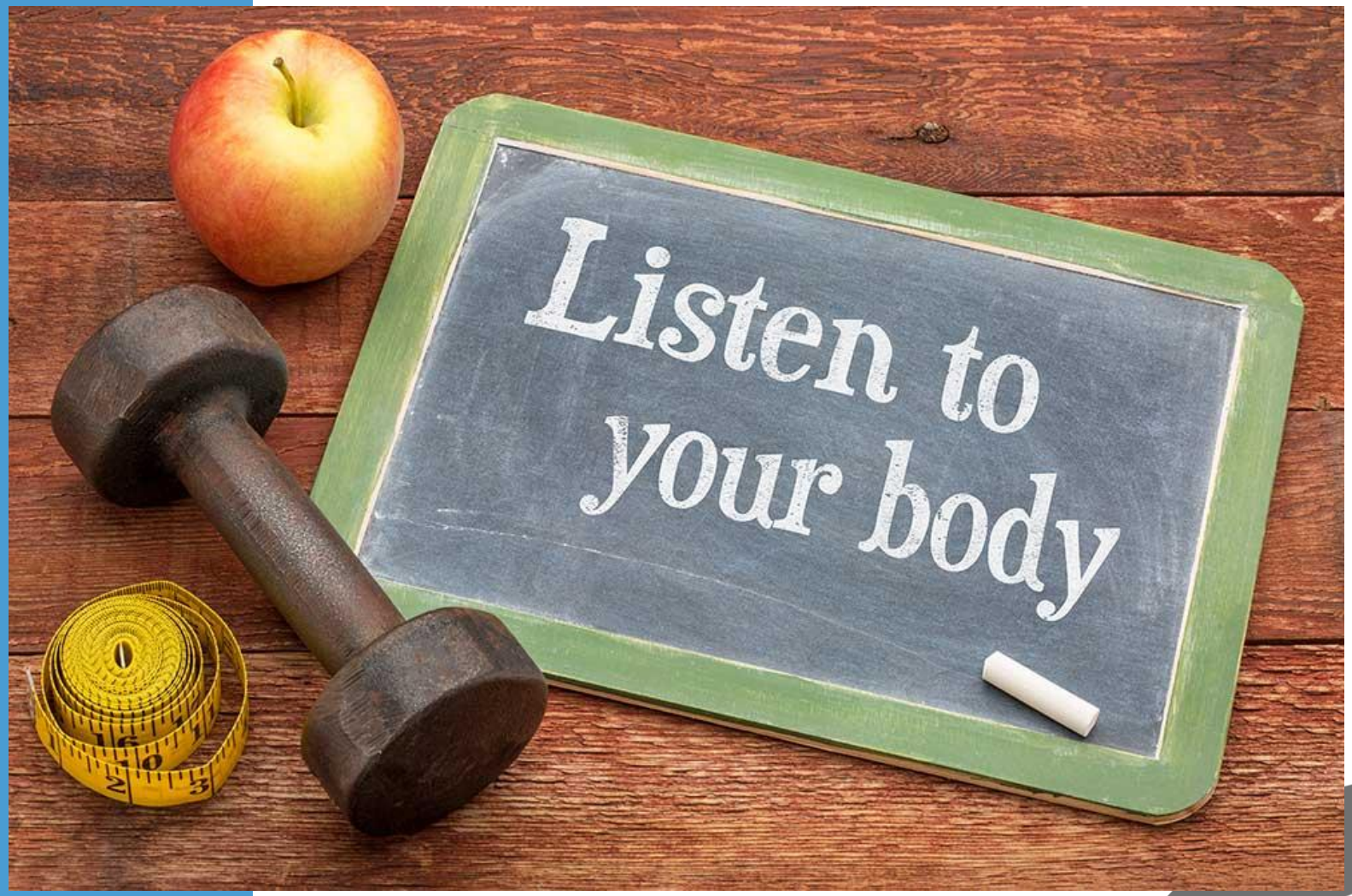
Craighead, L.W. (2006). The Appetite Awareness Workbook: How to listen to your body & overcome bingeing, overeating, & obsession with food. Oakland, CA: Harbinger Publications

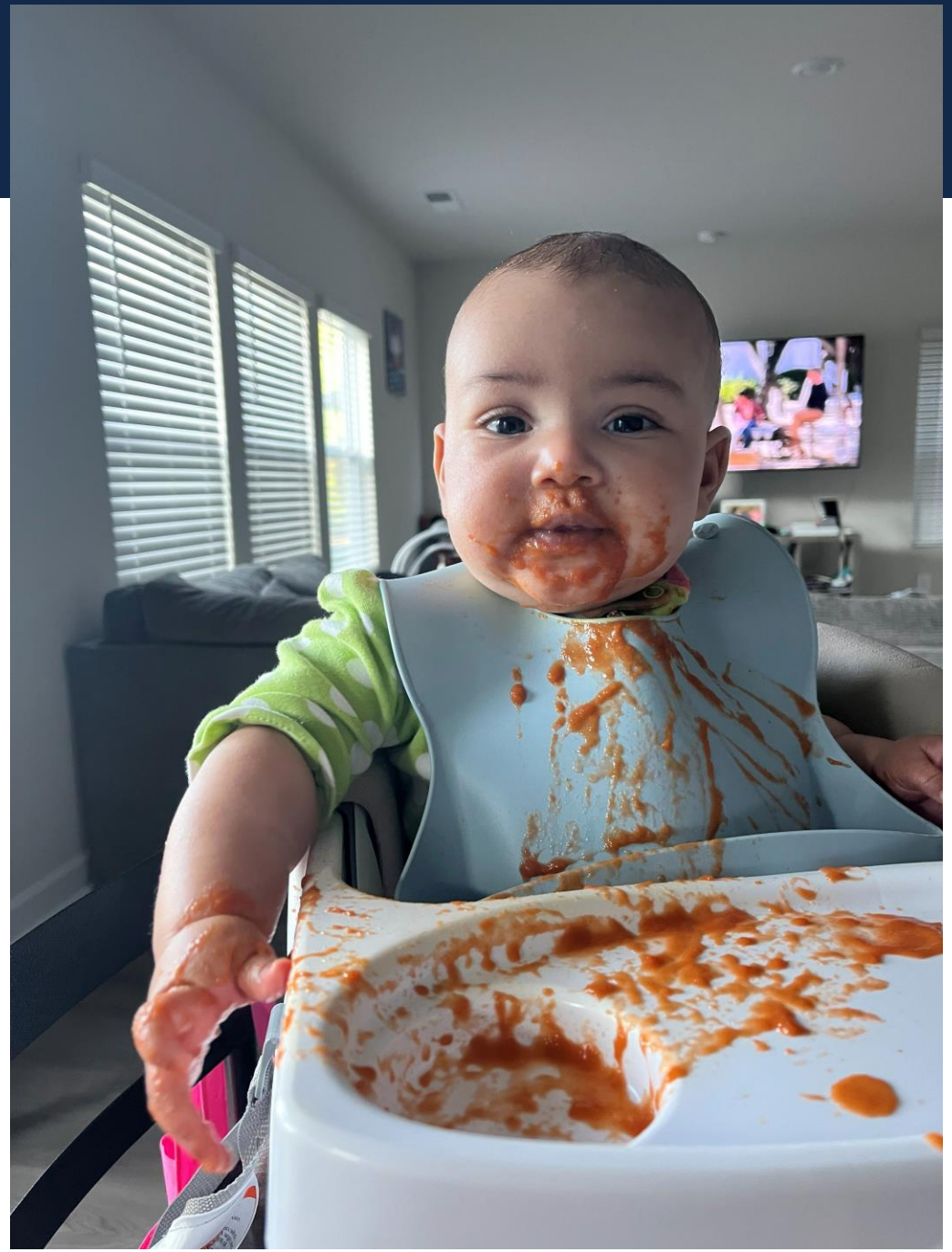
Physical vs Emotional Hunger

	Physical Hunger	Emotional Hunger
Fast Vs. Slow	Comes on gradually	Sudden urge
Origin of feeling	Sensation of stomach rumbling and growling	Desire for food is mostly in the mouth and the mind
What you are craving	Any food you like, to satisfy hunger	Craving for a very specific food
Characteristics	• May feel shaky, light-headed or weakness • Tired feeling, low energy • May feel a sense of emptiness in stomach • Mood changes	• Automatic or absent-minded eating • Eat to avoid the experience of unpleasant emotions • Eat in isolation • Cued food because they may be feeling bored, lonely, stressed, depressed, or sad
After eating	Hunger feeling leaves when you finish eating	May feel insatiable, still searching for just the right food

How Can We Build a Healthier Relationship with Food and Emotions?

Step 1.
Appetite Awareness





Remembering our first lessons about eating...

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Before Meal

Check-in with yourself.



Craighead, L.W. (2006). The Appetite Awareness Workbook: How to listen to your body & overcome bingeing, overeating, & obsession with food. Oakland, CA: Harbinger Publications

During the Meal

1. How does this food taste right now?

2. Would I still want more of it if I had to stop now?



After the Meal

1. Did you stop where you intended?
2. What influenced that?
3. What is my current fullness level?



Craighead, L.W. (2006). The Appetite Awareness Workbook: How to listen to your body & overcome bingeing, overeating, & obsession with food. Oakland, CA: Harbinger Publications

Step 2.
Emotional Mindfulness



What is Emotional Mindfulness?

- **Stay present without judgment**
- **Allow yourself to feel your emotions**
- **Recognize how emotions feel physically**



Hill, C. L., & Updegraff, J. A. (2012). Mindfulness and its relationship to emotional regulation. *Emotion*, *12*(1), 81.
Willcox, G. (1982). The feeling wheel: A tool for expanding awareness of emotions and increasing spontaneity and intimacy. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, *12*(4), 274-276.

Practicing Emotional Mindfulness

4 STEPS

Step 1

Recognizing what emotion is present

(for example: stress, sadness, anger, or joy).

Step 2

Naming it — saying to yourself, “I feel frustrated right now”.



Step 3

Observing where you feel it in your body

(like tension, heaviness, or restlessness).

Step 4

Allowing it to be there instead of ignoring, fighting, or covering it up

(such as by eating or distracting yourself).

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Willcox, G. (1982). The feeling wheel: A tool for expanding awareness of emotions and increasing spontaneity and intimacy. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, *12*(4), 274-276.

Why it Helps

Reduces Emotional Eating	Lowers Stress Response	Improves Self-care
Mindfully noticing emotions helps prevent using food to cope, supporting better blood sugar control.	**Calming the mind** reduces stress hormones that can raise blood sugar.	**Awareness of emotions** increases consistency with healthy habits and appetite awareness.

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Willcox, G. (1982). The feeling wheel: A tool for expanding awareness of emotions and increasing spontaneity and intimacy. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, *12*(4), 274-276.

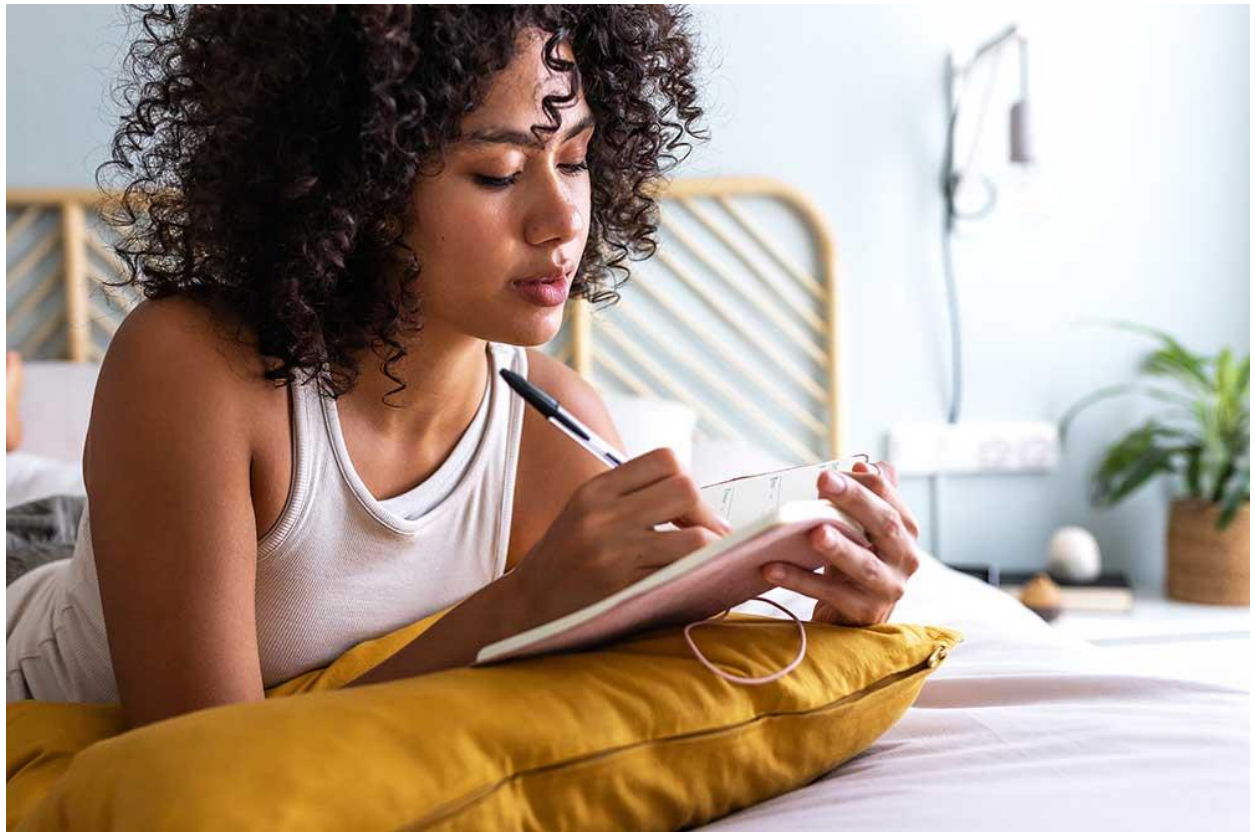
Step 3.

Turn Awareness into Action



Write





What would I tell my friend?

Hill, C. L., & Updegraff, J. A. (2012). Mindfulness and its relationship to emotional regulation. *Emotion*, *12*(1), 81.
Willcox, G. (1982). The feeling wheel: A tool for expanding awareness of emotions and increasing spontaneity and intimacy. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, *12*(4), 274-276.

Nourish

- Exercise
- Stretch
- Drink water
- Eat a balanced snack
- Prioritize restorative sleep



Community

- Call a friend
- Accept help
- Attend a support group
- Spend time with encouraging people
- Freedom from isolation



Breath

Breathing Exercises
To Relieve Anxiety

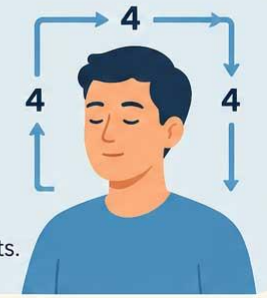


Belly Breathing

Slowly breathe in through your nose, letting your belly rise. Breathe out through your mouth, letting your belly fall. This helps reduce physical tension and calm your mind.

Box Breathing

Inhale for 4 seconds,
hold for 4 seconds,
exhale for 4 seconds,
hold for 4 seconds.
Repeat several times
to slow your heart rate
and reduce anxious thoughts.



Lion's Breath



Take a deep breath in through your nose, then open your mouth wide, stick out your tongue, and exhale with a strong "ha" sound. This releases built-up tension and promotes emotional release.

Bellow's Breath



Take a deep breath in, then exhale forcefully through your mouth, like a sigh. This helps clear mental fog and reduce feelings of restlessness.

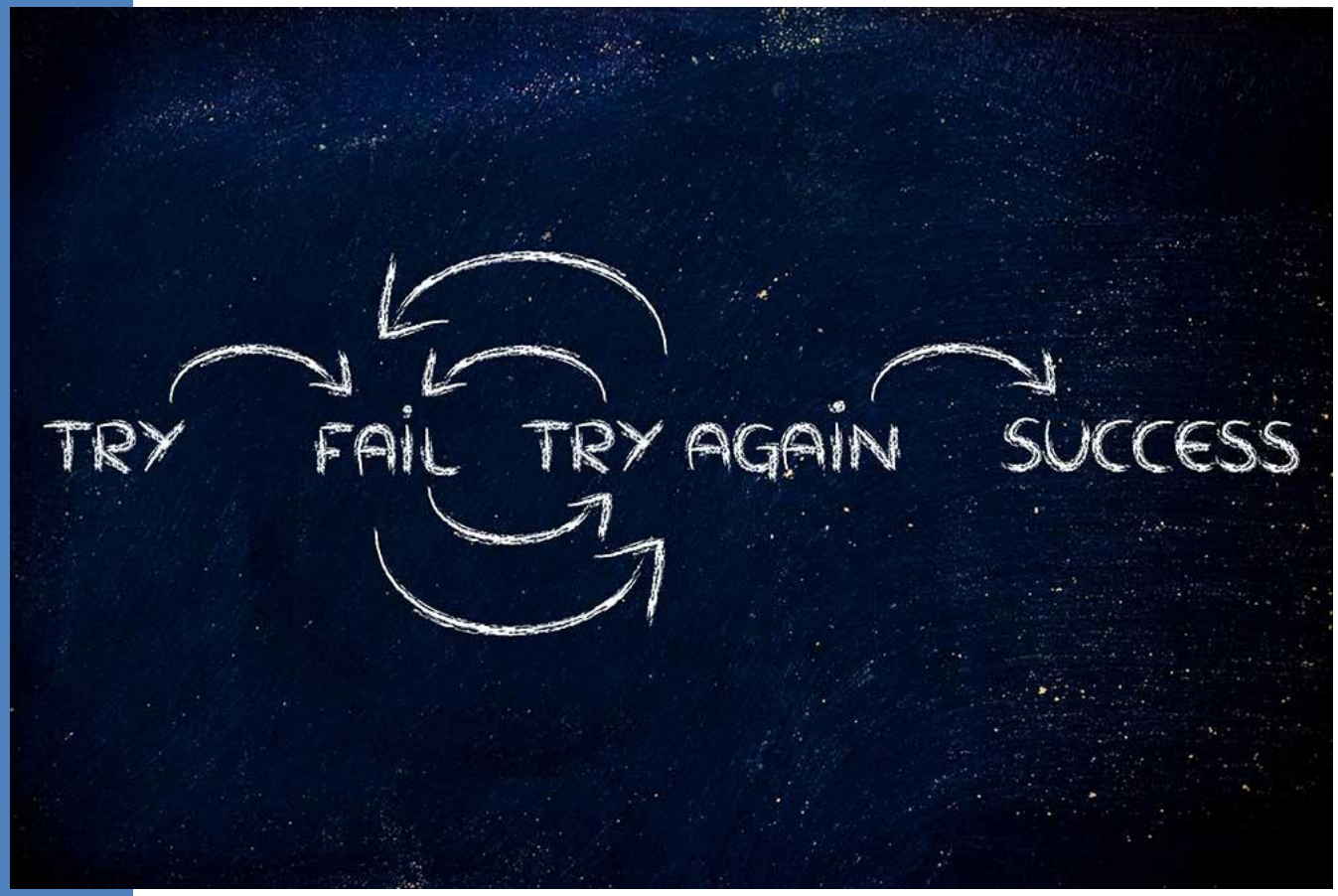
4-7-8 Breathing

Inhale for 4 seconds,
hold for 7 seconds,
exhale slowly for 8 seconds.
This promotes deep relaxation
and helps calm your nervous
system during anxiety.



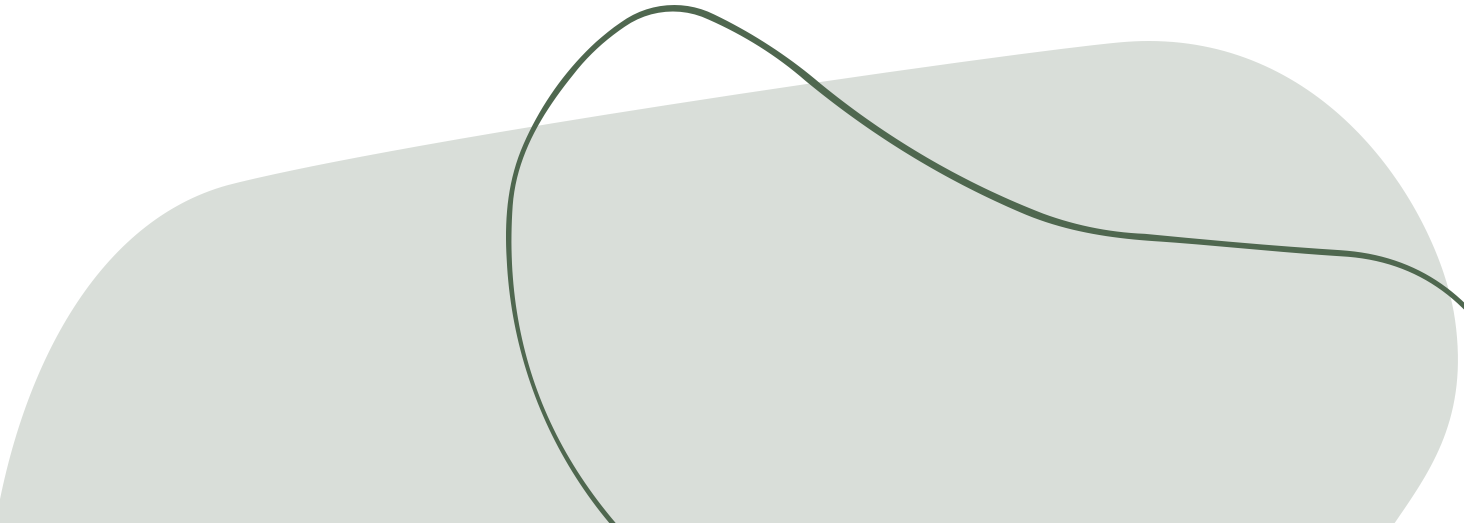
Step 4.

Move Forward with Intention



I tried all of that,
and I still feel like eating?

How to Work Through This?



Conscious Decisions (CD)

Permission

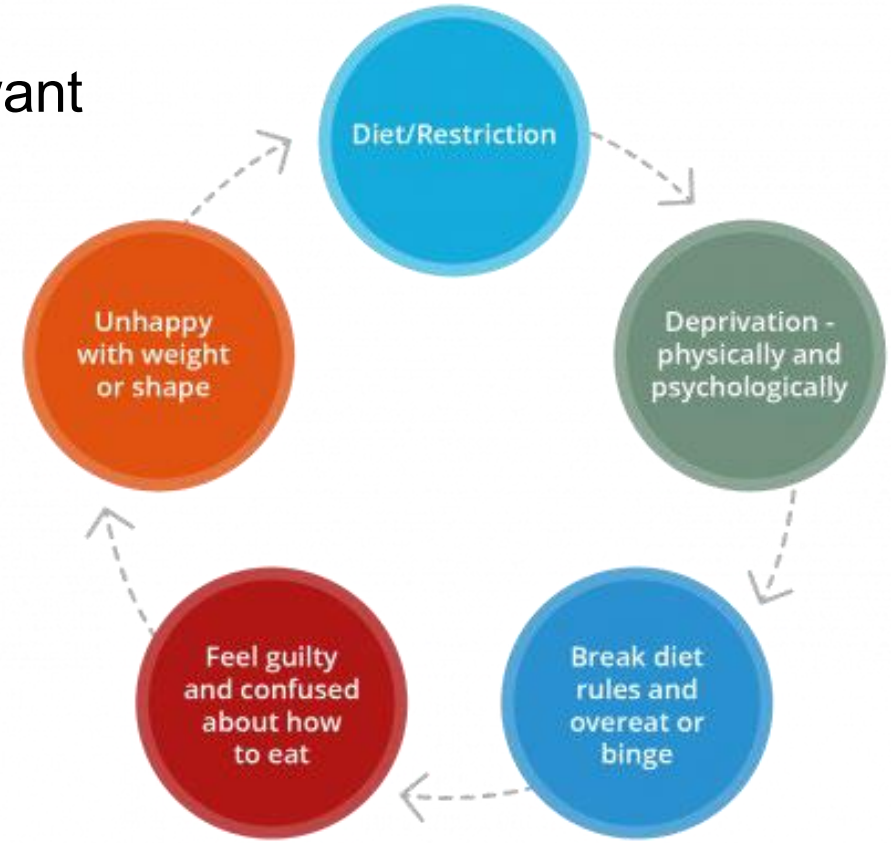
- Choose the amount that feels right: small, moderate, or satisfying
- **The Key: Be willing to give yourself permission**



Anti-Deprivation Eating (ADE)

DO NOT DEPRIVE

- **Allow** yourself a reasonable amount of the food you want
- **Listen** to your body



https://nedc.com.au/eating-disorders/eating-disorders-explained/disordered-eating-and-dieting/

“Worth it” or “Not Worth It”

BALANCE

- How it makes you feel within 20 mins, an hour?
- How it affects energy, focus, or sleep?

Creating your own set of foods

that are not worth it and not,

rather than using diet rules

MAKE YOUR OWN RULES

OTHERWISE OTHERS WILL

RULE YOU…

-NEELAM PANWAR

Follow the Trends:
Keep a Gentle Eating Journal for 3–5 Days

Track:

- When you eat
- How hungry you were before
- What you ate
- How full you felt afterward
- Emotions/situations that influenced your eating



Take Home Message



- **Identify** your triggers
- **Build** healthy coping skills
- **Practice** self-compassion
- **Seek support** when needed
- **Focus** on progress, not perfection