

Normal Eating vs. Disordered Eating



If you have an eating disorder, it's likely that you've been engaging in eating behaviours that are disordered and unhelpful, perhaps for quite some time. This can make it

difficult to figure out what normal, balanced, *non-disordered* eating looks like. This is particularly confusing when we live in a society where, even amongst people who don't have eating disorders, there is often an abundance of disordered eating.

Here we will consider the key components of normal eating: regularity, variety, flexibility, and fun!

Frequency of Eating

Ideally, humans function best when we eat regularly throughout the day. Regular eating is such a fundamental component of overcoming an eating disorder that we have created a separate handout focusing on this topic (see *Regular Eating for Recovery*).

How Much to Eat

It can be difficult to know how much energy our body needs for the day and therefore what portions to aim for at our meals and snacks. The amount of food required will differ from person to person based on a number of factors including their base metabolic rate and level of activity, their height, weight, and overall build, their age, gender etc. Essentially, weight maintenance occurs when our energy input and energy output are balanced.

What Kinds of Foods to Eat

In terms of what we eat, it might help to consider your consumption across the whole day, as well as the content on your plate at each meal. There are six major food groups, and we need to get a balance of three main macronutrients: carbohydrates, proteins, and fats. Typically, the following ratios are recommended as a guideline for the amount of energy each of these should contribute to our diet:

- Carbohydrates: 50-60%
- Protein: 10-20%
- Fats: 30%

If you want to know more about these macronutrients we have a handout on each of them! Australian dietary guidelines recommend aiming to eat some food each day from the following 6 food groups, at least:



- 6-7 serves of grains e.g., rice, pasta, cereal, bread
- 5-7 serves of vegetables
- 2-3 serves of fruit
- 3 serves of dairy products, e.g. milk, cheese, yoghurt
- 2-3 serve of meat, poultry, fish, or alternatives e.g., eggs tofu, nuts, seeds, beans
- 1-2+ serves of added fats e.g., avocado, olive oil, butter

It's also totally normal to include treat foods, purely for our enjoyment, like a slice of cake, some chocolate, or a packet of chips. Sometimes these will be described as "occasional", "energy dense", "sometimes", or "discretionary" foods...the most important thing to remember is that it's absolutely ok to include some of these foods each day! That's what makes for normal, balanced, non-disordered eating. The key is having a balanced intake with many different foods from all the different food groups.

The Reason for Eating

Have you ever considered *why* we eat? In fact, there are many reasons! We eat to fuel our bodies and brains, but we also eat for pleasure—as part of our socialising as humans, to celebrate certain occasions, perhaps in response to feeling tired, sad, anxious, or happy, or just because we feel like it! All of these are valid, normal reasons for eating.



Eating During Treatment vs. Recovered Eating

While in treatment for your eating disorder your eating may look a little different to the average non-eating disordered person. Perhaps you will have to monitor what you eat, be particularly vigilant about the timing of your meals and snacks, or engage in more planning and preparation around your meals than other people you know. If you are underweight and need to regain weight as part of your treatment, you may need to eat more than normal for a while. This is a typical part of going through treatment for an eating disorder, and is a stepping stone away from disordered eating and towards normal, balanced, eating. Most people find that further into their recovery, their eating becomes more flexible and intuitive.

Flexible Eating

To be fully recovered from an eating disorder means having the freedom of flexibility and choice. To join your colleagues for an impromptu outing for cake and coffee, or attend a family celebration without anxiety around the uncertainty of not knowing what food will be served. Normal eating varies in response to your emotions, your schedule, your hunger, and your proximity to food. When in doubt, remember to consider regularity, variety, flexibility, and fun!

Developed in conjunction with Kate Fleming, Dietitian

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