

Why Diets Do Not Work



If you enter the word "diet" into internet search engines you will get nearly 200 million results instantly. Diets are often marketed as the answer to people's problems, promising quick weight loss, body acceptance, physical health (e.g., detoxifying) and beauty. But if diets really work, then why do we need so many of them? In reality, the dieting industry is a multi-billion dollar industry that succeeds by making people feel bad about themselves. People quickly become stuck in a vicious cycle of dieting (and the dieting companies make even more money!).

What is a Diet?

Diets typically prescribe that a person follows a rigid pattern of eating for a strict period of time. The time frame may be short (e.g., 8 hours, 1 week) or long (e.g., 6 months). Diets prescribe what to eat, when to eat and how much to eat. But all diets are different! And if we tried to follow all the rules prescribed by available diets you would soon find that there is nothing much left to eat at all! People usually follow diets for the purposes of weight loss, to avoid weight gain, or for the purposes of cleansing their body. However in reality, diets have an extremely low success rate and persistent dieting behaviour can actually contribute to significant weight gain in the long-term.

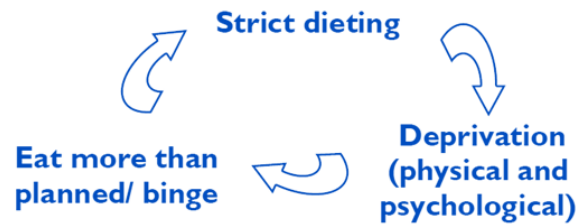


Physical and Psychological Deprivation

Most diets prescribe far too little food. When we do not eat enough from all food groups the body tips into a state of semi-starvation and induces physical deprivation. If we do not respond to this hunger by eating, the physiological pressure to eat builds up until we are driven to eat. Patients with an eating disorder often say that they do not feel hungry, which can be true, because when a person ignores hunger signals for a long period of time, the body stops recognising hunger. Despite this, the body still craves and needs adequate nutrition.

Consequences of Deprivation

When a person is physically and psychologically driven to eat, they often eat more than they had planned, eat foods they had previously tried to avoid, or lose control to the point of binge eating. When this happens, people often worry about how this eating will impact on their weight. Such worries can lead a person to diet more strictly than ever to 'make up' for breaking the rules of their diet, which sets them up for a vicious cycle to overeat or binge again.



Rigid Rules

Diet language often includes words such as "good", "bad", "cheat" and "guilt", which can lead people to develop strict and rigid rules about what to eat, when to eat and how much to eat. Rigid rules are different to guidelines. Having some guidelines about what we eat can help us maintain healthy eating. For example, someone may have the guideline "I try not to eat too many sugary foods". A rigid rule differs in that it is inflexible and 'all or nothing' in nature, for example, "I must never eat sugar at all". The rule is either followed or broken so our actions can only be 'right' or 'wrong'; we perceive ourselves to have 'succeeded' or 'failed'. This is problematic because if we try to follow rigid rules, psychological and physiological pressures to eat will build up until eventually we can't help but "break" these rules in some way.

Consequently, people will then perceive that they have "failed" their diet, which can exacerbate feelings of low mood and low self-esteem. Additionally, after breaking a dietary rule a person may think something like, "I've blown it now, I may as well eat the whole bag" or, "I've ruined today, I'll start again tomorrow", which can lead them to go from a small 'slip' in eating to overeating or a binge eating episode, reinforcing the vicious cycle of dieting once more.

Escaping the Vicious Cycle of Dieting

Dieting behaviour increases the risk of overeating or binge eating from physical and psychological deprivation. To reduce this risk, we need to eat regularly throughout the day and include adequate amounts from all food groups (see our handouts, *Regular Eating for Recovery* and *Normal Eating versus Disordered Eating*). Undereating and eating infrequently can actually slow down a person's metabolism, so that their body burns energy from food more slowly, and will conserve energy by storing it as fat. We also need to move away from any strict or rigid rules about what to eat, when to eat and how much to eat, and towards more flexible eating guidelines. Normal healthy eating involves daily consumption of foods from all food groups, including 'occasional foods' such as ice cream and chocolates. Remember, dieting will only keep the cycle of disordered eating going!