

Don't Weight, Grab Your Best Life Now!

Are You Cravey???

We all experience cravings of some sort at some time or another. If you Google “food cravings”, your search will yield a whole lot of articles about “taming, smashing, busting, or curbing your cravings.”

We might think indulging in food cravings leads to loss of control and excess intake, and yes, it sometimes does. And I reckon that cravings in general are not thought of as a “good thing”. But consider these questions:

- What if cravings could help you in some way?
- What if you could honor them without feeling like you wiped out all your efforts at eating well, practicing good self-care, or controlling yourself around food.

What are cravings anyway? Where do they come from?

A food craving is an intense desire to eat a particular food. Humans typically crave energy dense (high calorie per weight or volume) food. Chocolate is most often craved. (is anyone surprised???) People also crave savory foods, and even calorie-dilute foods, like fruit. (OMG right now in the summertime, fresh ripe peaches or cantaloupe, or watermelon...definitely crave-worthy!) Culture influences cravings too-in Japan, rice is often craved.

Hunger, on the other hand, is the absence of fullness, emptiness in the stomach.

You can experience cravings whether you are hungry or not. (Anybody care to raise a hand here?)

There is some claim that cravings are caused by nutrient deficiency, like chocolate is craved because of a magnesium deficiency. (if only my body NEEDED chocolate chip cookies to survive! -lol!) but science really does not support this.

It is interesting too-if you crave chocolate because of a lack of magnesium...why don't you crave green leafy vegetables, whole grains or legumes. These are all magnesium rich!

Some claim dieting causes cravings. And this gets a bit complex...depending on how restrictive the dieting is and how much of a restrained dieter you are. There is evidence that when cravings are ignored-in the SHORT term this increases intake in those who restrict more, but long term, cravings tend to lessen when they are ignored. I am NOT a promoter of dieting, just to be clear, but I want to avoid “absolutes”.

By definition, and particularly when weight loss is being pursued, restriction and restraint are part of the program. The bodymind perceives restriction as lack, and responds to lack

Don't Weight, Grab Your Best Life Now!

or scarcity with compensatory mechanisms that lead to increased desire to eat, as well as physiologic mechanisms that lead to weight gain. (this itself was a whole newsletter a few months ago!)

In researching this newsletter, I came across an interesting theory about cravings. I had never heard of it before! It's called the Elaborated Intrusion Theory of Desires (I will use EIT because it's easier to type!). It does help explain why cravings happen as well as support some ways to feel more in control when you experience them.

There are hormonal controls for hunger, appetite, fullness and eating, but our thinking and memory can override these controls. This can affect the decision to eat, to seek out food or to start or stop eating. This might explain why some of us humans' decisions around food are not always rational. (show of hands if you ever engaged in irrational eating...)

Our more "ancestral brain" responds to hunger and satiety signals automatically (no thought, emotion involved). If we need food, it may prompt us to look for food and eat it without really thinking about it (mindless grazing). If our hunger is not satisfied, it will intrude into our conscious thought. (We would consider it a spontaneous thought, though it really isn't).

EIT suggests that craving is a continuation (and elaboration) of this intrusive thought about food initially feel good...(I am hungry...for a Reesie Cup. Oh yeah, a Reesie Cup sounds so good, I am craving one!). So, we elaborate on the thought some more with even more imagery...to the point of it taking over one's thoughts. (a craving).

If deprivation is high

- No I am not allowed to have that candy!
- I have sworn off chocolate!
- I am on a diet!
- That candy is bad, evil!

This kind of thinking can create worsened mood which can then promote more vivid and heightened imagery (thinking of how good the indulgence will be). This persists until the cycle is broken by indulging in the craved food.

The cycle can also be broken by distraction or redirection of thinking. Either of these processes do take cognitive intention (i.e.-you gotta think about it!)

Key nugget: Periods of dieting are associated with decreased activity in brain regions that help control your impulses.

For lots more information on this EIT and cravings click here for the study link. (it's a little science-y but worth if you are a science nerd like me!)

Don't Weight, Grab Your Best Life Now!

Several ways that you can break the cycle were discussed in the journal article above.

- Repeated visualization of indulging (imagining yourself eating a Reesie cup 30 times in a row) That kind of makes my stomach hurt just thinking about it. Off topic story: Once when I was a kid, my friend and I walked to the grocery store and bought 2 ten packs of Reese cups (it was a buy one get one coupon-we were in heaven!). And we each ate a 10 pack, and hid from everyone. How crazy is that?? I was probably 10 years old.
- Engaging visuospatial working memory-this competes with the imagery of the craved food. You can do this by imagining the sights, smells, tastes of something different.
- Engage in tasks requiring spatiomeotor control like molding clay or make side to side eye movements.
- Engage in vivid fantasies of a different substance.

In the Intuitive Eating paradigm, it is recommended to indulge cravings.

This might make some people say

- Are you crazy? I'd be big as a house!
- No way can I do that!

The suggestion to indulge craving can generate real fear, of loss of control, of weight gain. But it's important to note, this indulgence is just *a part* of the whole IE paradigm...which is to eat in response to internal cues instead of emotions and situations. IE encourages honoring hunger, preferences, AND fullness.

FULL DISCLOSURE: I am not a certified IE coach or counselor. I share information about principles of intuitive eating because they are supported by research. There is good research that supports intuitive eating for improved and longer lasting health outcomes (and incidentally weight loss, though it is not meant to be weight loss program).

I highly recommend checking out the pioneers of Intuitive Eating (Evelyn Tribole and Eileen Resch) here

<https://www.intuitiveeating.org/> You can purchase their book there also

So as an intuitive eater, if you have a craving, what do you do?

1. Don't panic! Cravings are normal. You are not inferior, bad or weak because you are craving ice cream or any other food.
2. Sit with the craving-i.e. get curious about it.
 - What are you feeling in your body
 - What emotions or thoughts are you noticing?

Don't Weight, Grab Your Best Life Now!

- Do you notice anything you feel a NEED for (food? rest? company? distraction? movement? resolution? relaxation?)

KEY: This is not to PREVENT you from indulging your craving, but to discern what it's message is. ALSO-this doesn't have to take a long time...so-you probably DO have time to do it.

3. Meet your needs as best as you are able in the moment. At least recognize them
4. If you still want the food, eat it!

KEY: Do so with mindful awareness.

Taste it.

Feel it.

Enjoy it.

Stop when you don't (that is not restriction).

Notice when it stops feeling so enjoyable. Don't be afraid to admit this.

- Your belly is stretched out
- You are getting a belly ache
- You feel tired
- It just doesn't taste that great anymore.

KNOW -you can always have more. You don't have to get as much as you can because this is it, the moment you are "allowing" yourself to have it.

5. If you skipped over step 3, (it happens), check in...Do you still feel anxious, tired, lonely, angry, overwhelmed?

Recognize that indulging your craving, even if you enjoyed it, did not meet your needs. Not a judgement, but an observation. Imagine if a little girl asked you for a blanket because she was feeling cold or insecure and you gave her an ice cream cone instead. She might enjoy the ice cream cone, but afterwards she would still be cold (maybe colder!) and insecure! Would you feel like you had taken good care of her in that moment? Take good care of *yourself*, friend.

KEY: Focus on meeting your needs, honoring your own choices VS:

- Following the rules
- Eating good not bad foods

Don't Weight, Grab Your Best Life Now!

- Getting skinny not fat

BLECH! None of that sounds good! You can choose how you want to eat, to honor your preferences, and even to honor cravings and achieve and maintain optimal health and well-being. Your weight will optimize as well. You are worthy, intelligent, strong, and ALL the good things, whatever weight that is.

Leah Kern, RD has an Intuitive Eating podcast called Shoulders Down. In this episode she discusses honoring cravings, as well as many other aspects of intuitive eating in a very understandable compassionate way. This recommendation is not an endorsement of her particularly or everything she says (I have not reviewed all of her work or podcasts)...but this is a great podcast.

Mindset Matters Most

What do you believe about cravings and YOU? That

- Indulging in craving makes you fat?
- I can never beat a craving for _____
- You have no “willpower” when it comes to _____

What do YOU crave? Good foods or bad foods?

Angel devil pic

KEY: the only **bad foods** are foods that are

- Rotten/spoiled
- Poisonous
- Something you are allergic to or very intolerant of
- Stolen

When do you have cravings, do you notice?

If you want to explore your experience with craving a bit more and learn to use them to tune in to and attend to you needs, check out the worksheet in coaches corner!

Coaches Corner

What if anything do you want to do with this information about cravings?

Would you like to respond to cravings in a certain way?

Consider how you respond now.

Don't Weight, Grab Your Best Life Now!

What is your best first step?

- Self-awareness of where you are now
- Deciding what you want to do
- Getting/learning/doing what you need to do (craft smart goals around that).

If you want to explore your experience with cravings, here is a great tool!