

Eat by Choice, **Not by Habit**

**Practical Skills for Creating a
Healthy Relationship With
Your Body and Food**

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Being Your Own Best Friend

“The one who stays by your side and finds a home in your heart is indeed a true friend.”

ANONYMOUS

How can I befriend my body when it feels like a distant relative? I can't get rid of it, but I don't enjoy its company. And food is like an illicit lover. I'm always thinking about it, even when I don't want to. I don't even know what a healthy relationship between food and body is. What do you mean?

Imagine eating—or not eating—with a sense of harmony and balance because you're firmly connected to your feelings and needs. You know what choices to make in every moment. You eat in moderation, moving away from the table easily, without hassle, guilt, or the inclination to manipulate yourself into starvation. You savor six chocolate chip cookies straight from the oven on occasion without blame or shame. You step on a scale once in a while out of curiosity. You don't cringe and avoid the scale, and you're not wedded to weighing a certain number on the scale either. Instead, you're enjoying every sensual flavor of food—and of life, too.



I need to diet, or I'll be out of control. Not being on a diet sounds scary and too good to be true. I can't eat chocolate chip cookies and lose weight.

Robert Fritz once said, “Diet is a path of least resistance.” Looking for a fight? Deprive yourself of all the flavors and textures you’ve come to love, and keep yourself in a perpetual state of hunger.

According to Fritz, the word *diet* is synonymous to many with starving yourself. You feel hungry because you are hungry. “There will always be a discrepancy between the actual amount of food your body is consuming and the amount of food your body wants. Solely counting and restricting calories to lose weight doesn’t provide lasting results. But it’s one surefire way to kick in your obsession about all the food you *shouldn’t* be eating.”

When you count calories and restrict your intake you will inevitably come to the place where you just can’t stand measuring one more teaspoon of garlic sour cream mashed potatoes. Or you can’t bear to watch your husband eat another bowl of peach ice cream, making “Mmmm ...” sounds with every spoonful. So you indulge. You not only eat the six gooey chocolate chip cookies, you eat the whole tray, the peach ice cream, and all the garlic mashed potatoes, and a bag of chips, too, for that satisfying crunch. That unleashes the dreaded *shoulds*. You should eat differently. You know better. Shape up. You should lose weight. “Look at me. I’m a fat pig. I can’t even control myself.” This outburst is followed quickly by “Screw you; I can eat what I want.”

Now you’re not only dieting, you’ve activated the demand/resistance cycle, too. Demand change. Then resist it. As a bonus, moral judgment comes bounding in—you’re

“good” when you eat “right.” You’re “bad” when you give in. Moral judgments and compassion can’t coexist. Without compassion, long-term change is impossible. According to Carl Jung, Swiss psychiatrist and author, “Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses ... We cannot change anything until we accept it.”

Ultimately, you are having a relationship with struggle rather than deepening the relationship or connection with your body and your needs. Words like *should*, *shouldn’t*, *can’t*, and *won’t* deny your own responsibility for the choices you make.

The process of Compassionate Communication has helped create peace between warring countries, rival gang members, hostile business partners, married couples, neighbors, and friends. Just imagine how tuning into your needs and feelings could help you create peace between you and your body, as well as the way you eat and the foods you choose.



Why are diets so popular if they hardly ever work? Everyone seems crazy about the low-fat, low-carb, or high-protein diets.

They do work—in the short run. We are a culture craving quick fixes. And fad diets are just that—fads, like hula hoops, hot pants, and disco. Here until the next diet sensation. They were never intended as permanent solutions. Instead, they provide the newest one-diet-plan-fits-all gimmick to hook you into ways to alter your body without acknowledging your unique life experiences, habits, choices, and physical makeup.

Say you go on the latest diet to lose weight for a wedding or a class reunion, or to get revenge on your ex-boyfriend. After the long-awaited event, if you haven't unearthed what needs and feelings motivated you to hold the weight in the first place, you'll likely boomerang back to your familiar eating patterns. Because fad diets are short-term and don't address your personal needs, you'll continue your yo-yo dieting, unaware of a different way of *being* with your body and food.

In addition, fad diets often produce health repercussions that may last longer than the diet ever did. When Oprah Winfrey launched her first highly publicized protein diet, I told my partner, "Mark my words, six months to a year from now she's going to be back up to the same weight and probably even higher." My prediction proved to be accurate. When people on high-protein diets regain weight, which is probable, they've changed their body's composition. They actually have a higher fat percentage and less muscle than before they began.

Years ago, when many of us chose low-fat diets, manufacturers responded with an explosion of low-fat products made tastier with added sugar. This strategy has unwittingly contributed to a host of such health challenges as osteoporosis, cancer, diabetes, and heart disease, not to mention tooth decay and obesity. Increased sugar consumption also has caused a surge of Type 2 diabetes in children. Once found only in adults, Type 2 diabetes is being diagnosed in children as young as *five* due to poor diet and insufficient exercise. Alarmingly, one in every three children born in 2000 will develop diabetes.

There is also the low-carb craze. Instead of fats, carbohydrates are singled out as the bad guy. We need carbohydrates. Whole-grain carbohydrates are an inexpensive

energy source. They are the primary source of blood glucose, a major fuel for all the body's cells and virtually the only source of energy for the brain and red blood cells. Carbs also provide B vitamins that offer us stress relief and are vital to healthy hair, skin, and teeth. Note too, you can also find high quality carbohydrates in fruit, dairy, and vegetables.

Before clutching the next bagel, pause, breathe, and ask yourself: How am I feeling? What do I need? Follow this with a request of yourself. What choices are best for my individual health? What other needs am I trying to satisfy with any of these dieting strategies?



What makes you think people try to meet other needs by eating and dieting strategies?

Experience. In graduate school, whenever I was confused, frustrated, and overwhelmed while working on a paper, I would look for relief in the refrigerator. Or my house would get really clean. Or I'd surf all the TV channels. Back then, if I'd taken a moment to check in, I'd have heard, "I'm anxious. I want inspiration and creativity—now! I have no idea where to find it." I knew it wasn't in the refrigerator. But it was a way to distract and entertain me—a way to refrigerate my real needs.

A healthcare professional once said that he cherished his nightly ritual of snacking on cookies and milk while reading the newspaper. He more than cherished it. He couldn't do without it. It was sheer relaxation to him. After a few gentle questions, he revealed that his wife's depression medication also dampened her sexual desire. This left him lonely, longing for sexual and emotional intimacy with his beloved.

The moment he said that, something shifted. He suddenly saw his need for connection, saw the cookies and milk as edible substitutes. Now he has choices. He can open up to his wife or not. He can talk to his wife or keep eating the cookies. It's up to him.

Similarly, not long ago my partner's five-year-old granddaughter was so sad, she thought only one thing could help. "Do you have any chocolate?" she asked. I said: "Honey, you seem really upset. Do you want some loving? Would you like a hug?" "Yeah," she said, tears streaming down her face, forgetting all about the chocolate.

Instead of reaching for relief in a bar of chocolate, my partner, Tim, finds comfort in a disciplined diet, especially at times when his life seems out of control. Returning to structure soothes the anxiety welling inside. Never underestimate the unique, creative ways each of us has to satisfy the needs that call for our attention.

One way to discover the needs being met by your food choices is to list the foods you typically think of as *comfort foods*. When I asked my Eat by Choice food class to make such a list, they wrote: oatmeal, mashed potatoes, pudding, and pumpkin pie, all of which met needs for nurturance, love, and comfort. When I asked for a list of the foods people ate when they felt anxiety, they listed crunchy foods like Cheetos® and potato chips, meeting needs for relief and release. A woman noticed that crunchy foods were begging to be crunched to release the energy of anxiety. The foods were crunched into a soft, smooth texture. In that way, the actual chewing allowed the release and transformation of energy. Interestingly, the comfort foods were already soft and smooth.

When we grow conscious of the needs behind our food choices, we're also conscious of the abundance of choices or strategies we can use to fulfill those needs. Suddenly, the world is larger, and we expand, too. In one shift of awareness, cookies and milk transform from a need-hiding habit to an opportunity to make some far-reaching changes. Through one offer of a hug, the appeal of a sugary snack dissolves. The next few times you think about eating, tune in and ask, "Am I actually hungry?" You might be surprised by the answer.



As long as I recognize I'm an emotional eater, what's the harm in it? Sometimes I know I'm not hungry, and I eat anyway. I'm an emotional eater.

Awareness is the first step. If you say: "You know what? I want nurturing. And eating twenty-five potato chips is how I'm going to get it," at least you're aware that you're choosing the chips. Have you ever polished off a bag of chips unconsciously, not tasting a bite? You're left with nothing but greasy fingers, potato chip crumbs in your lap, and a vague salty sensation in your mouth. You're numb, but you still yearn for nurturing. You're stuffed and empty at the same time. You're more likely to reach for another bag of chips. As Anne Lamott says in her book *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, "I was a spy in the world of happy eating, always hungry, or stuffed, but never full."



All I have to do is be aware? That's it?

You don't have to do or be anything. NVC is about choice. Just as with the man with cookies and milk, when you're aware of your needs and what you're choosing this second, then options you'd never dreamed of before become alive to you. What do you want? Do you want a healthy lifestyle? Do you want to feel good and comfortable within? Then what choices are you willing to make every single day to make that happen? You can eat the chips, enjoying every salty crunch, you can call a loving friend, or you can curl up with a book.



How can I trust myself to make food choices that benefit me now? I've made so many food choices that I regret. What if I make more?

You're human. Chances are you'll make another regrettable choice or two in your lifetime. The difference is focus. This needs-based process of communicating internally focuses on being present and conscious with compassion—not being hyper-aware of every “flaw” and heckling or badgering yourself with insults. I like what Elin Rydahl, a practitioner of NVC says: “To give priority to oneself and one's own well-being without a sense of guilt or shame

“I have made a lot of mistakes falling in love—and regretted most of them—but never the potatoes that went with them.”

NORA EPHRON,
in her book *Heartburn*

is essential in order to reach the core of lasting change. If I can learn how to respect myself and my needs, can I also give myself the respect of a healthy body?”

If you make a choice you regret today—say, eating more pasta than you planned—Compassionate Communication invites you to say: “That was a choice I made. Thinking back about it, I’m regretful and wish I had chosen to tell my friend why I was upset instead of eating the pasta. I also know I’m human and am grateful to feel regret rather than blame. Tomorrow, I’m going to call her and attempt to resolve our differences. I really would like to make food and portion-size choices that meet my health needs.” Then, instead of hounding yourself with your perceived misdeeds or inadequacies, let it go, knowing that you’re in the process of discovering your needs moment by moment.

If you’ve made choices in the past that keep you up at nights, you could say: “You’re no good. You’ll never change. What makes you think this time will be different?”

Or you could cultivate the practice of self-acceptance: “At this point, I’m doing the best I can to honor my body. I care about my health and well-being and want to make different choices from the ones I made in the past. Looking back, I realize I’ve made choices in the past based on what I was going through in those moments. Sometimes I regret them because of the way they’ve impacted my body, health, and spirit. In this moment, however, I have compassion for me and for the reasons I made those choices.



Real people don't talk like that.

This way of self-talk may sound like a mouthful, but as with any new language, it grows easier and feels more natural the more you speak it. The energy behind the words is more important than the exact wording. That energy of self-acceptance it embodies can be transforming.

Take a moment and ask yourself: “Where do I still need healing around the choices I’ve made? Are there things I regret? Do I want to give myself some acknowledgment for ways in which I wished I’d made different choices?”

Now empathize with yourself. For example, if you say, “Every time I came home from school upset, I ate a whole bag of jelly beans,” you might ask yourself what need you were trying to meet. Were you lonely and seeking love? Did snacking on sugar meet that need for friends, fun, and understanding when your parents weren’t at home to talk to about your day?

Let yourself grieve those times when you chose jelly beans over calling a friend or going outside and playing to meet your emotional needs. Now you’re a conscious adult who knows that you can listen to your inner world at any moment for another satisfying way to experience love.

Reassure yourself: “I value health. In the past I’ve made choices to protect and nurture myself without considering the health implications as much as I would have liked. As a human being, I’m glad I’m feeling regretful and can mourn the decisions I’ve made without blaming myself or telling myself I should have behaved differently.”

Blame is a battle cry that rouses your opposing inner forces. Blame is your judge, your critic ... whatever pet name you have for it. It only feeds the demand/resistance cycle.

Acceptance and empathy open the pathway to powerful transformation.

This compassionate, empathic way of speaking allows you to stay connected to yourself at even the most fragile moments, moments when you would normally abandon yourself with judgment and shame and mindlessly eat the chips or ice cream.

Say you've put on weight in the past year, and your inner judge is running rampant. "I can't believe how much weight I've gained. Did I have no control over what I was doing? What excuse did I use not to go to the gym and work out?"

With compassion, bring the focus back to your feelings and needs. "I feel upset and frustrated and want reassurance that I'll make choices that are more in alignment with my health this year." Then tune in. Maybe you want some empathy for how hard it has been, with your hectic schedule, to go to the gym on a regular basis.

This self-empathy monologue is the antithesis to the inner critic. Gentleness with self also encourages change that lasts.



How will talking gently to myself help? How gentle can I be when I'm in the midst of intense food cravings? What if I have to have chocolate, and nothing else matters?

At the moment of real temptation, stop, even just for a second, and tune into your internal dialogue. Perhaps it's a whirl of thoughts, such as this:

"I must have something sweet. I'm stressed out! Nothing will satisfy this craving but my favorite chocolate bar. Besides,

chocolate relaxes me. But I've been telling everyone I'm on a diet, and eating chocolate doesn't fit into my diet. I'm getting my period, though. My hormones are out of whack. I need chocolate! I know Sylvia says we don't have physiological needs for chocolate, but I'm sure we must."

The first time you do this, you may find yourself biting into a chunk of chocolate before you've finished listening to the first thought. With practice, you'll be able to pause long enough to tune in to your needs and feelings and translate them into compassionate self-talk: "I'm torn! I'm sad and lonely and desperate for relief. There are lots of ways I can get relief. Chocolate is only one. Hiking with a friend might be fun. Maybe I'll open my art supplies and paint for twenty minutes. Which would I enjoy most in this moment, knowing that I also value health and well-being?"

Now, in this conscious state, whatever you decide is coming from a place of choice and presence. No *shoulds* about it. In these circumstances, if you choose chocolate, chances are you'll be able to truly savor a bite or two, whereas in the past even two chocolate bars may not have been "enough." You'll actually enjoy what you're eating without beating yourself up about it. That's because it's a gift you're giving yourself and receiving with peace. (Tip: My late friend Bernice Sachs said that when she ate quality chocolate, she was more readily satisfied with smaller portions.)



Is sugar addiction a part of what you're talking about? If so, how?

Sugar addiction is as much of a concern for some people as alcohol or drug addiction. You may not even realize how much sugar you're eating because it's found in all sorts of unexpected places and labeled under different names. Breakfast cereals, tomato sauces, and "healthy" mayo contain added sugars. Even a typical cup of fruit yogurt provides 70 percent of a day's worth of added sugar, according to the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI).

If you're paying attention to sugar consumption, check labels for these ingredients: sucrose, high-fructose corn syrup, corn syrup, dextrose, glucose, fructose, maltose, turbinado, cane sugar, honey, and molasses. Sugar by any other name is still sugar. Though some "sugars" may wreak less havoc with your blood sugar and offer limited nutrients, you may want to limit your sugar intake if you're making a concerted effort to improve your health.

A chocolate lover for most of my life, I started noticing I was drawn to chocolate when I was upset, lonely, or irritated. Chocolate soothed, nurtured, and relaxed me. Since I enjoy experimenting, in July 2004, I decided to try an alkalizing eating plan based on the book, *The pH Miracle: Balance Your Diet, Reclaim Your Health* by Robert O. Young and Shelley Redford Young. Their premise is that all sugar is acidic, including sugars in fruit. By making your body more alkaline, you can cure disease and improve your health status.

Although I craved chocolate for my first two weeks without it, the benefits of a sugar-free life have been astounding. I have no more urinary tract infections (UTIs). I used to get UTIs every few weeks. I'm excited because I often took

antibiotics, which weaken the immune system and are hard on the body. Antibiotics can also lead to yeast overgrowth—candida, which contributes to sugar cravings. Now my energy level is higher than it has been in years. And I no longer crave sweets, something I used to eat daily. That's because sugar stimulates a desire for more sugar. (In the resources section toward the end, see tips on how to reduce sugar cravings.)

Today my diet is mostly vegetables, fish, nuts, whole grains, and an occasional piece of chicken or turkey. I satisfy any desire for something sweet with cacao nibs and cashews or slices of fruit and yogurt.

I'm not the only one who has romanced sugar. The average American consumes more than twenty teaspoons of added sugars per day, twice what the U.S. Department of Agriculture recommends. Annual sugar consumption has soared from 144 pounds per person in 1994 to 156 pounds in 2004. That's the weight of an entire person in sugar! In the book *Own Your Health: Choosing the Best from Alternative & Conventional Medicine*, Roanne Weisman, with Brian Berman, MD, states that often when we crave something, it's not that we need it. We're actually allergic to it.

The spiking and plummeting of blood-sugar levels feed compulsive overeating. Mark Schultz, a recovering compulsive eater and NVC practitioner says: "With compulsive eating, I'd get short-term enjoyment and disconnect from my feelings. I'd feel some comfort, then get numb and feel depressed. I'd regret my behavior, condemn myself for it, then do it all over again." As his blood-sugar levels fell, so did his mood. He'd reach for more sugar to get the temporary high.

"It's easy to forget when you're feeling bad that what you need to do is stay with how you're feeling and figure out what you really need," adds Schultz. "It's a lot easier to just eat something, which is why addiction is so troublesome."

How can someone like Mark Schultz step out of the compulsive-eating cycle? Not by berating or depriving himself, but by something as simple and potent as the *pause*—pausing before eating your food of choice, or “holding the tension” as Becky Coleman, PhD, calls it. Coleman, a facilitator in food and body support groups, who weighed three hundred pounds—twice—has experienced firsthand how healing it is to develop the capacity to hold the tension that triggers a compulsive-eating binge.

In the midst of a craving, pause for five seconds to check in. How are you feeling? What do you need? What attracts you to the particular food you’re craving? You can still eat your coveted food. But be aware. How does the first bite taste? What about the second bite? The fifteenth bite? Are you still enjoying the flavor? Are you making yourself eat it all? How does your body feel after the last bite?

NVC has helped many people get off the anger/rage cycle, to stop their anger from escalating into rage and possible violence by tuning into their feelings and needs. So it also can help you get off the compulsive-eating treadmill. Experiment. Find out what works for you. With continual awareness, increased compassion, and self-acceptance, you’ll learn which foods and emotions trigger your compulsive-eating cycle.

As Schultz says: “At some point in this process, I realized I was slowly killing myself. Food became like my alcohol addiction. It was subtle, but it became a life-or-death thing. Now I experience myself just as I am. I experience my feelings. When I ate compulsively, I had no opportunity to do that.”

He continues: “Abstaining from Krispy Kreme is part of a spiritual discipline like abstaining from alcohol. I identify deprivation as the feeling of craving with the assessment that

I'm missing out. When I pass a Krispy Kreme donut on a shelf, I feel the ache and remind myself what deeper needs I'm meeting by abstaining—specifically, health, self-respect, valuing life, hope, belonging in the world.

“My experience is that the ache leads me to recognize those deeper unmet needs. Although technically I might be ‘missing out’ on Krispy Kreme, I trust that I’m connecting with myself in a more profound, satisfying way. I trust that my desire for a donut will eventually subside as my desire for alcohol did.”



What if I don't crave just sugar? Sometimes it seems like I'm addicted to all foods.

Meeting emotional needs with food at the expense of my body's needs may be considered violent. In another real-life account, here's how gentleness, compassion, and the pause, which are not sugar-specific healing tools, helped psychotherapist Katy Byrne release herself from her self proclaimed food obsession:

“I still cry when I talk about my eating disorder. I sometimes explode with grief for the years of suffering that I lived through, even though I've been free for fifteen years now. I rarely think about food anymore. I eat, or I don't eat. It's no big deal, but for so long I felt shame and chronic confusion. The longing for a normal life penetrated my pores, my cells. There was compulsion, thinking of food, wanting it to go away, hating myself, and trying things that didn't work. There was no time I didn't think about food: getting it, hiding it, swallowing it, being seen eating it. Food ... was following me like a shadow nearly every moment.

“This morning I was overwhelmed with tears and a sort of shock. I had the feeling that a miracle had happened to me, that I had been walking through a dense, dark jungle for so many long, lonely years—and that now I can look back on it and feel free of that psychic drain, that constant obsession.

“Sure, I still watch the ten pounds come and go. I still go from a size eight to eleven, depending on my intimacy issues, sorrow, or anxiety. But I no longer live with the worry that food is my life, or that it will gobble me up. Now I’m concerned with pleasure, health, and looking to see what is going on with me emotionally. My body usually gives me a clue that I am stuffing something. It tells me what I need to look at and move through. It is my compass.

“I stopped putting myself in abusive relationships with food, people, places, or things when I started what I call my *hairball writing*. Getting my hairball out meant really seeing what was inside, viewing the real feelings coming out of my gut.

“I tried everything—twelve-step programs, diets, nutritionists, exercise, prayer—programs of every kind. The transformation came for me when I got my deepest hairball out. I found a little girl in me longing for love, who needed care and craved affection, and who thought there was love in the refrigerator.

“I remember the day I stood with the fridge door open and cried, staring at the food. I talked to my inner kid that day—before devouring the food. To that little girl inside me, I said: ‘What do you really want? I won’t beat you up anymore for it: just talk to me.’

“She said: ‘I want food. Give me all that food in there. Get me chocolate-covered malt balls, wheat thins, donuts, and pizza.’

“I said: ‘OK, I’ll get them for you, but will that make you feel any better? What is it you really need?’

“She said: ‘I really don’t want to be bloated and sick. I want to be soothed. I want to be loved, and I want to feel full.’

“I said, ‘What would that do for you?’

“That was the beginning of the change. I felt stupid standing at the fridge talking to myself. But that was the way for me: getting my hairball out.”



Doesn't heredity play a big role in my ability to lose weight? You're forgetting something. Isn't there more to weight and eating than emotions and needs?

Heredity, hormones, or undiagnosed illnesses like celiac sprue (in which eating gluten sets off an autoimmune response damaging to the small intestine) may play some part in weight-loss difficulty. However, people also frequently use heredity as a reason why their bodies are not in alignment with their desired weight.

I think people may confuse heredity with lifestyle. David E. Schteingart, MD, professor in the Department of Internal Medicine and director of the Obesity Rehabilitation Outpatient Program at the University of Michigan, says genetics are only 25 percent of your risk of being obese.

Cultural influences, personal lifestyle, and availability of food make up the other 75 percent. If you grow up in a household where fried foods, white bread, and sugary snacks are the norm, you may choose these foods as well. They feel like home. In that sense, you're inheriting certain

tastes. However, those tastes aren't genetically imprinted. If you choose poor-quality fats and hydrogenated foods, you are actively clogging your arteries.

Or let's say your family members eat whenever they're upset. Until you become aware of this pattern or habit, you, too, may eat when you're upset without connecting to your needs. The choices you make at any moment impact your health.

If you choose to take your children to a fast-food restaurant six days a week, they will likely be obese and confront health concerns early in life. When one parent is labeled obese (according to standard height and weight charts) and the other parent is labeled normal weight based on the same charts, their child has a 60 percent chance of being obese. If both parents are obese, their child has an 80 percent chance of being obese (based on lifestyle choices). Here's it's worth reflecting again on the words of Carl Jung: "If there is anything we wish to change in the child, we should first examine it and see whether it is not something that could be better changed in ourselves."

In the last ten years, obesity has risen more than 50 percent. According to Dr. Richard H. Carmona, the U.S. surgeon general, obesity is fast surpassing smoking as the number one cause of death from lifestyle choices. Three hundred thousand lives a year are lost to obesity. Its annual cost to society is approximately one hundred seventeen billion dollars. But these are just numbers. We can read this and say, "What a shame." What really motivates us to take action? Author Robert Fritz says it's not health threats from the world at large. It comes from inside, wanting something different for yourself. You may find inspiration in the most unlikely places.

For example, a friend of mine stopped eating hamburgers after watching the documentary, *Super Size Me*. In it, filmmaker Morgan Spurlock highlights the hazards of frequent fast-food eating and directly links it to the rise of obesity in the United States. According to Spurlock, in 1972 U.S. citizens spent three billion dollars a year on fast food, whereas today we spend more than one hundred ten billion dollars annually. He decided to demonstrate the hazards for himself by eating nothing but McDonald's food for breakfast, lunch, and dinner for thirty days. He made an agreement with himself before starting: If the clerk asked if he wanted his portion "supersized," he would say yes.

Doctors were shocked by how quickly there was a negative impact on this thirty-something man's health. His cholesterol shot up. His liver started to deteriorate. After fifteen days, his doctors strongly urged him to stop, citing health risks if he continued. Spurlock plowed on—against their advice and under the worried looks of his vegan chef girlfriend. He gained 5 percent of his body weight. Eventually, he felt good only after his sugar high from eating. That's how addicting the food became to his body. Imagine the impact on your child.



How do you get a child to eat more healthful foods? He's being bombarded by fast-food commercials, all his friends eat sugary snacks all day, and schools have soft drink and candy vending machines everywhere.

I'm gathering that you're frustrated and want some support in navigating your way around many of the "unhealthy"

choices available to your child. In the same movie *Super Size Me*, Natural Ovens Bakery was highlighted for the impact of fresh, healthful foods on learning and behavior at Appleton Central Alternative High School in Wisconsin. There, so-called troubled teens showed amazing results when they changed their diets. Within one week of this diet change, teachers and administrators noticed students' attention spans had lengthened, and vandalism decreased. The school's most difficult problem was now a lack of parking spaces.

Natural Ovens Bakery did a five-year study at this alternative school with amazing results. Natural Ovens Bakery says if children continue to consume what they are now, they may be the first generation to die before their parents. That saddens me since we have choices about what we consume and what we give to our children. I not only want to preserve life, but quality of life as well.

How do we teach children to eat more healthfully? Short of force-feeding them through a tube in a hospital, you can't force your child to eat. Everyone has a need for autonomy. Kids want choice, and parents are worried about their kids' health. Parents often don't take their child's individual needs into account. They have to go to school, have to go to church, have to play with Floyd, have to, have to, have to.

Eating or not eating is one way children announce that they "*don't* have to." In fact, eating disorders often begin in children because that's the one area in their lives they have more control over.

This is understandably troubling to parents because they want their kids to eat all the nutrients they need to grow into healthy adults. Thus began the "Kids Are Starving in India Clean-Plate Club" threat and the "Try it so you'll know if you like it" plea. Instead of prompting eager eaters,

this cajoling merely creates another demand/resistance cycle: “Nobody’s going to tell me what to do. I don’t have to. You can’t make me!”

When we—children *or* adults—hear a demand, we naturally resist, even if it’s the very thing we want. This stems from our strong need for autonomy, which begins at birth. At a nutrition lecture, Ellyn Satter, author of the book *How to Get Your Kid to Eat—But Not Too Much*, spoke about anorexic babies. When Mom or Dad demands the child nurse or take the bottle, the baby resists. The parents likely want to meet their needs to contribute to this new being, as well as worry about their level of mastery as new parents. The baby senses the urgency of the request, hears it as a demand, and resists, even though it may well be exactly what the child wants.

When I was a child, my father used to cook pancakes once or twice a year. If I didn’t eat as many pancakes as he liked, he’d say, “Oh, you didn’t like my pancakes.” For him, food equaled love. If you don’t eat all the pancakes, then you don’t love me or value my contributions to you. Even as a child, I remember wanting my body’s needs to be respected and my choices to be honored.

As an adult, when I visit my parents’ house, my mother often sets food on the kitchen table while we’re sitting around chatting: Reese’s peanut butter cookies, pistachio cake, poppy-seed cake, Hershey’s syrup cake, foods I don’t currently eat. “Eat! You’re not eating enough,” she’ll say. That’s a phrase that still rings in my ears from my childhood. In my younger years, I heard the message as a demand. I wanted choice and autonomy. Even when I was hungry, I’d say, “No, thanks.”

Today, I often hear comments from parents like, “My kids won’t eat anything but white or brown food” (macaroni and cheese, white bread, rice, chicken, and sweets). They’re seen as

“picky” eaters. For this very reason, Dr. Mehmet Oz, who was a regular on the Oprah Winfrey Show, calls them “the white kids” no matter what their skin color. Dr. Oz also said that you may want to continue to ask your children to try a new food—it may take ten requests before there is a willingness to check it out.

What can you say when you want to offer more variety to your child’s diet? How about: “Can we explore different foods you like that also offer nutrition that will help you grow healthy?”

Or: “I know you enjoy sweet foods. Do you need something else, too? How about if we explore the needs you meet by eating cookies?”

Another possible overture—parent to child: “As a parent, I’m responsible to contribute to your life and to your health, so I’m making plenty of foods available that satisfy that need. I want to assure you that we’ll find snacks and meals that are tasty and appealing to you as well. Would you be willing to try one new food a week to explore what you like?”

You may be saying: “Me? How can I say that to a kid who is screaming for Pop-Tarts? Or one who says, ‘Stop talking!’”

Offer empathy: “Do you want your needs to be considered about what foods you enjoy?” or “Do you want a choice about what you’d like to eat without having to worry about your health?” Empathy invites dialogue.

I enjoyed a dialogue recently with Alina, the eight-year-old granddaughter of my partner, Tim. I grabbed the rice crackers from her lap when I saw her eating more of them than I was happy about. The following morning while cooking breakfast, Alina’s seven-year-old sister, Anissa, found a spider web she wanted to disassemble. Alina shouted: “Don’t! The spiders worked hard to make that web.”

Anissa was focused on how spiders can hurt people. I suggested that spiders, like humans, probably hurt each other when they are scared. Then I told Alina that I regretted snatching the cracker box away from her without a dialogue. I told her I was concerned that she would develop habits of mindless eating that wouldn't serve her well in her life. Alina suggested that maybe I was also scared that cracker crumbs might destroy my computer. Empathy sure is contagious!

More important than the words you speak is the intent behind the words. You're providing appealing choices while setting boundaries. If you're concerned about what your child is eating at a friend's house, you can talk to the friend's parents or send over food that you consider fun and healthful. You're also teaching your children about food by your own choices, the way you speak about food, and your own level of self-acceptance around food.

Think about your own childhood messages—perhaps there's something about food that your mom, dad, grandparent, cousin, aunt, uncle, or friend said that you're still carrying around, being triggered by, and holding as truth. I agree with "Anonymous," who once said, "When you go home, of course your family is going to push your buttons; they're the ones who installed them."

I grew up with a girl whose mother padlocked the cabinets shut because she didn't want her children eating certain foods. What message did that send to her children? What did that say about which foods are acceptable and unacceptable? What dynamics do her children live with now as adults?

Are there any old messages you're still chewing on? If so, translate them into the possible feelings and needs of the person who said them.

How can I get his voice out of my head? My father always used to tell me I was too fat to eat chocolate.

This message is about Dad, not you. With Compassionate Communication skills, you can translate what was going on for your father. Was he scared? Did he want to protect you from pain he suffered while growing up? Did he feel sad about the food choices he made in the past or ones he still makes?

When a person speaks, his message is about his own needs. When you take the message personally, then you're locked into a few possible reactions, for example:

- You can feel lousy about yourself, agreeing with the other person's diagnosis of you.
- You can react defensively by attacking him.
- You can do both at the same time.

As you delve into the situation and see more clearly what may have prompted Dad's comment, you'll find yourself experiencing compassion for his fears. And you'll be able to acknowledge your own present reality.

You don't even have to talk with Dad to heal the situation with him. You can work through it on your own or with support from others. The key is to move through those stuck places that still influence you today by unraveling the feelings and needs of anyone involved.

You may discover lingering hurt feelings of your own that need healing. I'm guessing you may have felt sad and upset and would have liked understanding and acceptance, no matter what you weighed or looked like. I sense that you would have liked some compassion in that situation and feared you were being judged. Now you can choose to give

yourself (that little girl) some compassion for her fears, as well as her desire to belong.



How do I get past my childhood messages? My mom always said, “No dessert unless you eat all your fruits and vegetables.” Now I see nutritious foods as a punishment.

Parents often use food as a way to reward their children for “behaving” or punish them when they’re “misbehaving.” For example:

- “If you don’t scream while we’re in the store, I’ll take you to McDonald’s for lunch.”
- “Do that one more time, and no cake for you!”

One woman recalls being sent to bed without supper as a child as punishment. She lived in dire poverty and was starving much of the time anyway. Her hunger magnified everything: the voices of her family talking about how tasty the meal was, the sounds of silverware scraping plates, the scent of her favorite potatoes. That left a huge “food-print” on her. For years the sensation of hunger would panic her. As a result, if she was full, even overfull, she’d think, “I must have been a very good girl.”

Another friend got Tootsie Rolls if she sat still for haircuts or stopped calling her sisters names. Today she rewards herself with food treats for every deed she deems “good.” She’s not the only one. Chances are you know some adults who say, “If I finish my project, I get to eat as much

ice cream as I want.” Or: “It’s a special anniversary; let’s treat ourselves to a gourmet restaurant.”

In a system of justice based on punishments and rewards, we believe we deserve to suffer if we aren’t following our diet. Some people reward themselves for dieting and for depriving themselves of their favorite foods for months by eating all of them in one sitting. Either extreme keeps us from being present to what we’re feeling at this moment. Instead of viewing eating as a reward or punishment, ask: “What do I want to do regarding my eating, my body? What do I want my reasons to be for doing it?”

As for disentangling yourself from old messages about nutritious foods, did you hear the message “You should eat your fruits and vegetables” as a demand? Are you now resisting fruits and vegetables because you translated your mom’s urgency as a demand? Are you eating out of habit rather than choice? Or are you still hoping to punish your mother—and needing empathy for the pain she stimulated in you?

Give yourself empathy for the pain you felt and may still feel. Feel the regret that you weren’t able to hear your mother’s message as her hopes and dreams for your health and well-being and instead interpreted her message as a punishment. Acknowledge to yourself the desire to enjoy foods that nourish you and keep you healthy.

You have a choice to look at what nutrients your body really needs. What fruits and vegetables can you get them from? You can look at blueberries and think: “Those are antioxidants. They eat up free radicals that can be causing disease in my body.” (Free radicals are harmful chemicals found in the body that have been implicated in cancer and heart disease.) Do you want to fight against that? Or do you say: “I like blueberries anyway. Maybe I can add them to my

yogurt today.” Over time you’ll see food as nurturing gifts that contribute to your life, rather than fighting against a voice from the past that’s not helping you connect to your needs.



What if the voice I’m struggling with is my doctor’s? My doctor says I have to lose weight, or I could be dead in two years. Where’s the choice in that?

Let’s translate that message with the Compassionate Communication process: “My doctor is concerned and wants to inspire change. Maybe he’s worried about his ability as a doctor to help patients make changes to enhance their health.”

Even though you may not have enjoyed or appreciated this doctor’s delivery system, you want to check in with yourself to find your truth. Is there anything in what he’s saying that really does make sense to you? Let’s say your blood pressure is 140/95, you’re five feet two, and you weigh 195 pounds. You could die of a stroke tomorrow. Does your weight concern you regarding your health and well-being? Or have you had enough of life? Are you ready to die, so the state of your health is OK with you? What’s true for you? Do you want to live? Do you want to enjoy life? Do you have things to live for? If you choose life, you will choose strategies that meet those needs. If not, you will choose strategies to end your life.

Try on these responses:

- “I’m imagining a more peaceful life with more comfort within if my blood pressure lowered to 120/80

and my weight reached a place where I could walk up and down steps without being out of breath.”

- “I want the freedom to eat what I want when I want, and I don’t enjoy exercise. I will live with the consequences.”

Next, ask yourself, “Do I want to make either of these choices no matter what anyone else wants?”

Other people’s threats, warnings, teasing, and pleas typically don’t catalyze powerful change. How many cigarette packages carry warnings from the surgeon general? How many people know about this threat and still smoke cigarettes?

More often than not, external advice activates a *should* reaction. “I should lose weight. My doctor says so.” Or, “My partner (or husband or wife) wants me to lose weight.”

This creates a push-pull between what someone else wants and what you want. You say, “What does that doctor know?” or “Screw you, if you don’t accept me the way I am.” You’re filled with resistance because you think you have to, or should, or must. “You don’t think I’m acceptable if I don’t lose weight. I’ll show you.” From your anger and resentment, you make others pay for “*shoulding*” you.

You’re likely living with an internal push/pull as well. You want health, and you want the freedom to eat what you want, when you want, in the quantities you want. When you *should* yourself, it’s very unlikely you’ll connect with your needs or get what you want. However, when you meet every moment with compassion, acceptance, and empathy, then you have nothing to fight against. You are your own ally. From that spaciousness, you are free to choose what you want and create a strategy in

which you are naturally satisfied. Ultimately, no food craving is a match for compassion.



Can you really change patterns you've had for more than twenty years? Even if you discover your needs, work through childhood food messages and get rid of your shoulds?

Absolutely. “I was once again the world’s oldest toddler,” says author Anne Lamott about learning to feed herself at age thirty-three after years of bulimia. “I practiced, and all of a sudden I was Helen Keller after she breaks the code for ‘water,’ walking around touching things, learning their names. Only in my case, I was discovering which foods I was hungry for, and what it was like to eat them.”

It’s never too late or too early to begin again. Case in point: When Oprah Winfrey interviewed Robert Downey Jr. on her show, she asked him how hard it was to come clean after years of drug abuse. He told her: “Once I decided to change, doing something different was easy.” The harrow-ing part was clinging to a strategy that harmed him, all the while believing that the strategy was saving him.