

**F**ood  
is not the  
**P**roblem:  
Deal With What is!

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A Few Last Words

## With Gratitude

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# INTRODUCTION

## **a.k.a. Why do I want to read this book?**

Do you often eat when you are not hungry? Do you eat beyond the point of comfortable fullness? Do you fantasize about what you are going to eat when you next get to be alone with food? Do you feel shame and guilt for eating certain types of foods, or for eating at certain times of the day? Perhaps you restrict yourself from eating when you are hungry. Do you imagine what you would like to eat, maybe even prepare it for others, and then get off on the experience of not allowing it for yourself? If you answered *yes* to any of these questions, you are using food to cope. If this is the case, this book is for you. Welcome to the start of a new way of being in relationship with food and with your body.

The purpose of this book is to provide you with the education and skills you need to heal from your use of food as a coping strategy. It will also greatly benefit you if you use alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, sex, relationships, self-harm, rage, and any other coping behaviours to help you numb or soothe painful thoughts or feelings.

If you would like to get an immediate sense of how you will benefit from our work together, flip to Chapter 7, and have a look at the coping strategy flow chart. If any of those patterns of thoughts, feelings, or behaviours seem familiar to you, know that you will gain an opportunity to heal those patterns by exploring and implementing the tools outlined in the chapters to follow.

As a clinician with over a decade of experience specializing in the field of disordered eating, depression, and trauma, I have come

to identify three key areas of focus in supporting clients to heal: your relationship with food; your relationship with yourself; and your relationships with others. My intention is that by the time we have completed our work together, you will be confident in your ability to address these three key areas in a way that continually enhances your sense of confidence and trust in yourself, and that provides you with a life which is free of food and body-image focus.

If you are one of the millions of men and women who use food to cope in one of the ways I described above, take a moment and ask yourself the following questions:

- What exactly is it that you do with food right now?
- How does it impact your feelings about your body at this time?
- How do you feel when you engage in that way of being with food?
- What are the thoughts that you have when you engage in this behaviour?
- What are the things that you do or don't do in your life because of how you think and feel about your relationship with your body and food?
- What is the impact on your life of thinking and feeling and behaving this way?
- What is the price that you and others around you pay for your current behaviours, thoughts, and feelings about food and about your body?

Given your answers to these questions, you might feel reinforced in your belief that it truly is your behaviour around food, and your non-compliant body, that are to blame for how you feel about yourself and for what is not working in your life at this time. You may feel that you have just proven to yourself yet again that food *is* the problem, and, if you could just change this, everything else would shift; you wouldn't feel so crappy, sad or angry; you wouldn't think so negatively of yourself and believe that you truly are undeserving

of happiness and peace in your life; you wouldn't hate your body; you'd be getting out more; you'd feel safe engaging in relationships more fully and deeply; you wouldn't be afraid to say what's on your mind; you wouldn't be thinking about harming yourself; you'd exercise more; you'd take better care of yourself overall.

Based on this story, everything seems to hinge on you getting a solid handle on your relationship with food. No wonder food is such a powerful force in your life. No wonder there is such an emotional charge around your current relationship with food and so much self-judgement.

What we are going to explore together in the pages to come, and what you are about to learn and to quickly prove to yourself, is that the issue is not food. And it's not about your body either. Food and body focus are just symptoms of a deeper concern. As with isolation, anxiety, depression, fear, procrastination, and negative self-talk, food and body focus stem from something deeper and do not arise in and of themselves.

You cannot focus your emotional, psychological, and behavioural efforts on changing your relationship with food and body image and expect any lasting change to occur. If you have picked up this book, it means that on a gut level you know that dieting, or restriction of any kind, is not going to get you where you want to go.

You may be coming to this process with a great deal of judgement of yourself and the assumption that if you only tried harder; if you only had more willpower; if you only were more committed or less lazy; if you really, really wanted things to change, you would be able to make that diet or exercise program stick. Given the line of thinking that is so prevalent in our society, namely, that it is something wrong or lacking in you that prevents your success with diet and exercise, it would be perfectly appropriate for you to be entering this process of lasting growth and transformation with some self-judgement.

Regardless of the judgement and self-recrimination you may be carrying about your perceived past failures, the important thing is that you are willing to allow for the possibility, however remote it

may seem, that there is something beyond food and body image that is triggering you to use food and body focus to cope. The process outlined in this book will identify what that underlying trigger is and what you can do to begin to heal and overcome that pattern so you can come to a place of never again thinking of using food to cope.

My goal for you is a free and easy relationship with food and with your body. The pages that follow will provide you with a step-by-step approach to identifying and healing not just your relationship with food but also the underlying trigger. This will allow you to let go of your food and body focus once and for all.

Let's begin the journey.

NB: In the interest of simplicity, I have chosen to use the pronoun "she". Please know that we do have male clients at the CEDRIC Centre, and we respect that these issues pertain to men as well as women.

**SECTION I**

**EXPLORING YOUR READINESS  
FOR CHANGE**

## Food is not the Problem

From the time I was a little girl, I used food to cope. I ate when I wasn't hungry, ate more than I needed to when I had a meal, and sometimes I would not allow myself to eat when I *was* hungry. For years I played around with food in these ways, using it for pleasure and punishment, nurturing and neglect. It served its purpose because I was so focused on what I was eating, what I was going to eat, what I shouldn't have eaten, and the physical ramifications of it all (my weight!) that I hardly noticed how incredibly insecure and unsafe I felt all the time. I was so accustomed to feeling anxious that I began to chalk it up to the lack of satisfaction I felt with my body. If I just looked the way I wanted to and could just control myself around food, I certainly wouldn't feel so insecure and anxious all the time. Right?

Well, not exactly. You see, like you, I had a damn fine reason for feeling anxious. I had a reason to feel unsafe and insecure in myself and in my world. My focus on food and body image was only a coping strategy that I learned very early in life to help me “numb out” to the lack of safety and security I felt in my home. I say “like you,” because I know that, even if you didn't have an abusive home environment or can't put your finger on any specific

event which would be a “reason” to use food to cope, you do have a legitimate reason. I know it. You may doubt it or question what it might be. You may even be reading this saying, “Yeah, yeah. I know this happened to me when I was ten, but it doesn’t impact me now!” Regardless of your perspective at this moment, my own recovery and my 13 years of professional experience specializing in the area of compulsive eating leaves me with absolutely no doubt that, **if you use food to cope in any of the ways I described above, you have reason to, and it’s time to stop judging yourself and start seeking to understand.**

The title of this book is *Food is not the Problem: Deal With What Is!* Food is *not* the problem. Even though it may now have become its own problem, it is not the underlying problem in and of itself. Coming to understand what the underlying trigger is for you, and what can be done about it now, is what will allow you to finally free yourself from food and body-image obsession and come to a natural relationship with food.

Often, people who engage in the process of recovery from the Diet Mentality initially feel frustrated and as though they are not making progress. This happens because you come to the process of recovery thinking that it is all about your body. You believe that you would be acceptable and nothing would stand in your way, if only your body looked normal or weren’t so fat/thin. Therefore, if you do not see immediate change in your physical form (some change that is tangible), you feel stuck, hopeless, and become so discouraged that you will give up and return to the old patterns of restriction/overeating and feelings of guilt and shame. You don’t know what else to do, and even though the old way has never worked before, it is something!

So allow yourself to consider the thought that you will forever be vulnerable to your old way of thinking, and it will sabotage you and the change you are seeking to create if you remain fixated on external signs of physical change as the only true indication of progress. This is the irony of the situation; it’s the old way of thinking of yourself and food that you are seeking to change, and yet it’s the old

way of thinking which you allow yourself to believe in and return to when the going gets tough!

And when I say *you*, I mean all of us who have become so confused about our behaviour around food and its true cause that we keep replaying the same scene in our lives, hoping for a different outcome. The pop-psychology definition of insanity is: *doing the same thing and expecting different results*. Well, what would you call dieting? Isn't one diet like any other, after all? Calories in. Calories out. One of my favorite authors, Barbara Sher, writes in her book *I Could Do Anything If Only I Knew What It Was*: "When too many people fail a requirement, there is nothing wrong with them, there is something wrong with the requirement!"

I love this quote because she makes a key point that resonates deeply with those of us who have been struggling to "meet the requirement" of our society of the ideal physical form, to be the good girl, or to feel and think the "right" way. When we are forced to ignore the natural signals from our body about what we need—whether it is food, safety, or a connection with others or with ourselves in order to meet the needs of our society or the key people in our lives—there is clearly something wrong with the requirement of those relationships.

In the early stages of recovery from the Diet Mentality, you are still looking for physical change as the indicator of your progress or success. This physical change can only come from a marked change in your relationship with food; however, **your relationship with food exists as it does because you have not yet found a way to feel safe in the world**. What must come before any noticeable change to your relationship with food, and subsequently your body shape and size, is a strengthening of your Self to the point that you are able to trust in your ability to handle the ups and downs that life throws your way. You must come to trust your perception of your feelings and of life events, knowing that you will respond appropriately to those feelings. As you come to trust yourself to have integrity, meaning your words and actions are aligned, and to feel safe being authentic

in all situations, you will naturally be able to experience thoughts, feelings, and life events without the use of food as a crutch.

In this book I will use the terms Compulsive Eating, Diet Mentality, and Disordered Eating interchangeably. In my professional experience, they are one and the same. Each one speaks to a relationship with food which is not being driven or dictated by our bodies but by messages from outside ourselves about what we should be, do, think, feel and eat. When you are focused outside of yourself for cues about what your body needs and wants, you are robbing yourself of the power that comes from being connected to your body and to yourself, and the power to trust that you know what you need and want. In these instances, you are setting yourself up to be vulnerable to the needs and perspectives of other people who may not be aligned with what you truly want or need. Therefore, your needs continue to be unmet, and your need for food grows to cope with this increasing sense of insecurity.

Stop and think for a moment about how frequently you allow yourself to trust the signals from your body. Let's say it is 11 a.m. You had breakfast at 8:30, even though you weren't hungry (but it was breakfast time after all!), and yet it is now 11 a.m. and your body is sending you signals of hunger. How do you respond? Do you mistrust that signal and question how you could possibly be hungry? Do you judge these signals as good or bad? Do you feel frustrated and annoyed at your body for being hungry so soon after eating? Do you feel excited because now you get to eat "legitimately"? Do you force yourself to wait until "lunch time"? And at whatever point you *do* allow yourself to eat something, do you force yourself to stop before you are full, or do you eat everything, even though you are feeling full part way through?

An affirmative to any of the above responses to a natural cue from your body that you are hungry is an indicator that your relationship with food has taken a turn to the unhealthy. It doesn't matter how those symptoms manifest themselves. Whether you overeat, binge and purge, or use more of a restrictive pattern with food, the cause is the same and so is the cure. And yes, I did say cure. The

Diet Mentality is not something that you have for life as if it were some incurable disease. It is a naturally and appropriately occurring set of symptoms that is present in your life because of some underlying event or series of events. As you attend to the underlying cause of those symptoms and its manifestation in your present life, you will find that your need for food as an aid to coping naturally fades away.

You can think of it this way. Let's say you have a sinus infection, but you don't know it yet. You are aware that you have a headache. You are aware that your nose runs a lot. You are aware that you are feeling tired. You take a pill for the headache, and you blow your nose. You feel annoyed at your fatigue and frustrated with your body for demanding so much attention and for not functioning optimally. You work yourself into quite a tizzy, focusing on your fatigue—maybe it's cancer! And the headache... brain tumor! That's just too scary. Better not look further. Let's just keep doing what we're doing and hope it goes away. Eventually, you are going to find yourself at the doctor because you will get tired of those headaches, nasal drip and fatigue, and the doctor will immediately put two and two together and hand you a prescription for an antibiotic for your sinus infection. You breathe a sigh of relief. You say, "I knew there was some reason for those headaches. Thank God it's just a sinus infection!" You attend to the underlying cause of those symptoms that had you so frustrated and scared, and soon you are well again.

But how much extra emotional, psychological and physical stress did you unnecessarily put yourself through? By not trusting that your body was telling you about some legitimate problem which required your attention, you experienced much more stress and strain than necessary. This is exactly what you are doing with food. Your relationship with food is a naturally and appropriately occurring symptom of some underlying trigger or concern. It is not *the* problem! It is trying to tell you that something else requires your attention—pronto!

I promise, as you begin to understand more about your underlying trigger and what you can do to heal this in your present day

life, your use of food to cope will naturally ease and eventually diminish entirely. When this happens for our clients at the CEDRIC Centre, they find themselves coming to a natural weight for their bodies without dieting or any specific focus on weight or fitness. This means they have come to have a natural relationship with food; they eat when they are hungry, they stop when they are full. It's this simple. The "what to eat" ceases to be an issue when the signals of hunger and fullness are consistently responded to.

If you have struggled with overeating, purging, restriction, or a mixture of the three, take heart. There is nothing wrong with you. You have simply been taught to focus on the symptoms or, as I did, found the symptoms of your problem a lot easier to focus on than the problem itself! Well, you are a grownup now. You may not feel as though you are most of the time. You may even resent that you have to take care of yourself. That's okay. We are going to work on this together.

I know you are capable of understanding and attending to the underlying trigger of your Diet Mentality. In the chapters to come, I will support you to have a complete understanding of the trigger(s) for your compulsive or restrictive eating. In case you are wondering, we are not going to spend much time reliving the past. We are going to focus on how this initial trigger continues to impact you today in your relationship with food, your relationship with yourself, and your relationship with others.

By the time you have completed this book, you will have a solid grasp on the two key components for healing the use of food as a coping strategy: empathy and compassion. You will soon see that from these two components, all else flows. You will have experimented with the use of a variety of tools. You will have witnessed yourself finding many different ways of resolving stress and conflict within and with others which don't involve self-criticism, food, or bad body thoughts. You will know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that food focus is just a coping strategy, and you will no longer spin your wheels focusing on what, when, and why you have just eaten. You will immediately identify the trigger of your desire to use food to

cope, and you will then be in a position to make a choice between using food in the old way or to use one of your new tools. This is all we can ask of ourselves in any behavioural change: the intellectual ability to understand why we do what we do and the compassion to support ourselves to find new ways to cope that are more respectful and life-enhancing.

As you begin to explore your use of food to cope, know this: **there is always a reason for why you do what you do.** You are *not* weak. You do *not* lack willpower. You are *not* stupid or lacking in deservedness. I repeat, there is always a reason for why you do what you do, and the key is in trusting this. For now, if you are skeptical but willing, trust me, and you will soon prove this to yourself. In addition to trusting that there is always a reason for why you do what you do with food, trust this equally as well: **there is always a solution.** It may not be your dream or ideal solution at first glance, but there is always a solution. There is always a way to resolve every situation that will enhance your self-esteem and maintain the dignity of yourself and of the others involved.

Are you ready for a life which is free from a focus on food and body image? Follow the steps in this book and you will begin to experience a natural lessening in your use of food to cope, and in your 24/7 thoughts of food and body image. You also will experience the greatest gift of all—PEACE (something that you may not have thought you wanted or needed, and something that you never allowed yourself to dream was achievable). The empathy and compassion that you develop for yourself and others through this process will bring you to a relationship with yourself and with the key people in your life that is more intimate, safe, and more beautiful than anything you have imagined. Let us journey together, and gently explore new ways of responding to life that remove your need for food to cope and bring you closer to yourself and to a peaceful, secure, and passionate existence. Welcome to a new way of life.