

# Holiday Tips to Help People Who Struggle with Food and Body Image

As Christians, sometimes in an attempt to steward our bodies well, we go overboard and buy too heavily into diet culture, or we unconsciously turn certain beauty standards or ways of eating into an idol. We may base our view of self on our physical appearance or how fit we are instead of in our relationship with Christ. We may end up in an endless cycle of counting calories and strict diets that never seem to give us what we seek. These patterns are doomed to fail because they become idolatrous and are unhealthy for our mental health and self-care, especially for people struggling with any kind of disordered eating.

An alternative to diet mentality is Intuitive Eating, “an approach to food that encourages you to listen to your body and what it’s saying,<sup>1</sup>” and helps you make peace with food and your body. These 7 tips, based on intuitive eating principles and the Gospel, can serve as a guide as you work with people who struggle with food and body image, especially during the holidays.

## 1. Help people love their God-given bodies.

Remind people they truly are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14) and that God made bodies in all their diverse sizes and shapes. Not only did God form the physical body and breathe life into it, but, when we follow Christ, our bodies become a temple, a dwelling place, for the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Therefore, as an integral part of who we are and precious to God, all bodies deserve dignity and respect. Help clients develop positive self-talk that counters both the negative things they may think about themselves and what other people may say about their body or diet. For example, “I am valuable because I am a child of God. God made my body, and I am thankful for it.” Ask guiding questions so clients can discern what positive self-talk would work for them, even if it feels only partially true.

## 2. Help people appreciate, enjoy, and savor their food.

Discuss ways they can savor the food they eat, focusing on the taste and texture, so they can mindfully eat instead of focusing on calories or

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<sup>1</sup> [“Helping People Relate to Food and Their Bodies”](#) Rosalin Brueck, 2017

exercise. Remind them that God gave us food to nourish us as well as for us to enjoy. Help them identify foods they enjoy eating and why they like them. Give thanks for them.

### 3. Help people be more flexible with food.

Start by helping them identify the restrictive rules they have around food, such as not going for seconds, skipping dessert and snacks, and refusing to eat in front of others. Work with them to break those strict food rules in a safe, incremental process. Have them practice eating 1 or 2 feared foods with you before their holiday gatherings and process what comes up for them. Create a plan with clients to try eating the feared foods at gatherings, if they feel ready to do so.

### 4. Help people identify if food or body image is an idol in their lives.

Gently help them discern: Do they go to food to comfort or soothe painful emotions before anything else? Do they use food or how they look as a way to create a sense of control in their lives or to get their identity from others based on their physical appearance? If so, invite clients to grieve and repent by turning toward Christ for his comfort and be affirmed by how he sees them and forms their identity.

### 5. With seconds, help people honor their fullness by tuning into their hunger and fullness cues.

People can learn to rate their hunger and fullness on a scale of 1-10 (1 = extremely hungry, 10 = extremely full) and then make a decision to eat more or not based on their reading of their hunger. For those who struggle with binge eating, it can be very difficult to honor their fullness, and they can easily cave to social pressure, so work with them to practice attunement and decline the additional unwanted food that is offered. For example, "No, thank you. The food was delicious, and I am full." Or "No, thank you. I don't want any more [unwanted food], but I will have dessert."

### 6. Help people set loving boundaries with others to help them avoid triggering unhealthy eating behaviors.

Many people feel that declining food may hurt the feelings of people they care about. Reassure people with eating disorders that they have a valid reason to say no if what they are being asked to do with food will negatively impact their recovery. Practice how they can simply appreciate others without over-

explaining their reasons for declining food. For example, “Thank you for your hospitality and opening up your home to us. I feel so welcomed.” Help them release the anxiety or shame they feel when they first say no by guiding them to receive their approval from Christ.

## 7. Help people shift focus from food and body image to aspects of the holiday season they are grateful for.

Discuss what they might enjoy about the holidays: preparing for Christmas through the Advent season, seeing loved ones, decorating their home, buying or making gifts, volunteering, and holiday movies. Over the holiday season, have them add to a list or journal new things they have found to appreciate. Help them cultivate a deeper relationship with God where they experience his love and grace in this season, appreciating that, even in the midst of brokenness, his goodness is readily available to them.

As caregivers and clinicians, we need to be aware that people around us may be struggling with eating disorders and some of the cultural conversations around food and body image are unhealthy. With this in mind, we can help by paying attention to how we talk about food, our bodies, and physical appearance, especially during holiday gatherings.

*\*If someone is struggling with symptoms of an eating disorder and needs additional care, please refer them to an eating disorder professional or specialist.*