

Nutrition Therapy and Intuitive Eating: What's In It For You?



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Introduction

Most nutrition counseling focuses on what you should eat, how much and when. Nothing wrong with that. But what if you already know a lot about nutrition?

Our clients at Nutrition Therapy Associates know a great deal about nutrition and how to eat, as do most people who struggle with eating and weight problems. They know about fruits and vegetables. They know how to count calories. They know what a portion looks like. They know why protein is needed.

However, they struggle to apply this knowledge. No matter how hard they try, they can't seem to eat the way they want to. If this describes you, you don't need more nutrition information, or even nutrition counseling.

But you could benefit from specialized nutrition therapy, which examines why you can't make or sustain changes in your eating, and addresses underlying issues. We have found that when clients change their relationship with food, basically getting out of their own way, they are freed up to eat healthfully and able to negotiate food and eating without worry or angst. They can then, finally, easily quit eating when satisfied.

This specialized nutrition therapy addresses such concerns as:

- Why are you so afraid of certain foods?
- Do you need a meal plan? And, if not, what can you do?
- Is your diet truly healthy?
- Why do you keep overeating at night?
- Why can't you stay away from desserts?
- What is making you stop for ice cream on the way home from work?

Nutrition therapy does not start by changing your food (although there are situations in which we need to immediately address nutrition, especially if someone is medically unstable).

Instead, nutrition therapy begins by changing the way you think about food, which then changes the way you interact with food. Often, this is enough for our clients, who can then easily select the foods they need to eat healthfully, and achieve a sense of peace around their food and eating.

Some clients begin with a meal plan. Some clients need a few initial tweaks in what they are eating. But, believe it or not, others receive minimal specific nutritional guidance!

This is because almost all of our clients already aspire to healthy eating. They don't need motivation to eat healthy, and many don't need *more* nutrition information to help them eat healthy. However, they do need help to fix what is getting in the way of achieving their nutrition goals.

We find that their basic nutrition knowledge is enough to put them on the right track once they've changed their relationship with food and eating.

Through nutrition therapy, we help them fix what is in the way so their natural, joyful, healthy eater can show her or himself. At the same time, we guide clients to their own eating wisdom so they no longer struggle with food, and can easily walk away from a meal or snack, satisfied and ready to move on to something else.

Sound confusing? It's not, really. Let's take a look at one client's journey. This is a great example of helping a client change her relationship with food. We discuss whether the body can be trusted to guide eating, the basics of hunger and fullness, as well as the important concept of Hunger Waves.

Let me first introduce you to the client, and then we'll delve into what happened in one session in particular.

What Used to Work Is No Longer Working

Robin was a 32-year-old accountant who was 5'6" and weighed 147 pounds. She had recently begun to follow an eating program she learned about at CrossFit classes. Initially, things went well. She was able to follow the program, was losing weight, and "felt great" about her progress.

Unfortunately, after several months, she was struggling to follow the program. The foods she had easily avoided seemed to call to her. She began eating more, and was no longer losing weight.

Robin felt desperate and decided to try nutrition therapy. She was nervous when she called me, not knowing what to expect and feeling like a failure, but she decided to make an appointment.

Can't Stay On The Plan

It was clear to me during her nutrition assessment that Robin had amazing discipline. She was an accomplished professional who was rising quickly to the top of her profession. She completed whatever she started, and had an active social life, often helping out friends on the weekend. She was dedicated to a healthy lifestyle and prioritized healthy eating and working out; however, this is where her sense of accomplishment faltered.

When she was on an eating plan, she followed it expertly. She cooked the right foods, ate well and had no interest in “junk” food. She felt proud of herself when following the plan, life just seemed better. Plus, she found it easier to stay committed to her workout routine when her eating was on target.

When she fell off the program, however, she found herself eating the very foods she had been avoiding. She would worry and struggle to get back on the plan, and complained that the older she got, the more difficult it was. (This is common. Rather than a function of age, it appears to be related to the number of times a person tries to restrict food intake—the more they try to restrict, the more difficult it becomes.)

She knew she had willpower and hated herself when she could not access it.

Weight Lost and Found Again

The first time Robin decided to eat healthy and exercise, she was 16 years old. She cut out desserts and began running 5 times a week. She lost 6 pounds. Looking back, she admits she had not been “overweight,” but felt fat and thought losing would help.

Within a year, however, she had regained those 6 pounds, plus a few extra. She continued to try to manage her food but found it increasingly difficult, so she went to Weight Watchers when she was 19. She lost 12 pounds, but again, gained it all back.

Robin tried numerous eating plans during her college years, including Paleo, veganism and increasingly rigid healthy eating. She could lose the weight, but it always found her again.

At age 31, she joined CrossFit, and was thrilled to lose 22 pounds in four months with a rigorous workout program and low carb meal plan. She reported that the group support helped motivate her, and training at the center at least 5 times a week seemed to keep her on track.

But it was not long before she found herself eating foods not allowed by the program. Her guilt slowly turned into a sense of helplessness and she began to skip the workouts. Soon she wasn't going at all. As is so often the case, Robin regained the weight and then some.

She felt she had exhausted all avenues and was desperate, which is when a friend referred her to me.

Concern That Intuitive Eating Will Not Work

I slowly showed her exactly why her old programs kept failing, and how the fault was not with her, it was inherent in nutrition information she was given. I can't stress enough how important it is to understand why traditional nutrition information backfires to open the way to learn an entirely new way of dealing with food and eating.

We began to explore the new paradigm of managing food and weight called intuitive eating. But Robin was appalled at the idea of eating when hungry and quitting when satisfied, a core tenet of intuitive eating. She was sure that listening to her body, especially when her hunger felt so out of control, would result in a significant weight gain.

She had always been able to lose weight in the past by tuning out her body and following an eating program, using her intellect to guide her. She would figure out calories. Or have smaller portion sizes. She would determine which carbs should be avoided. Et cetera.

How could she possibly listen to her body?

We discussed how, what seemed like her saving grace--using her brilliant mind to guide her eating--was actually her greatest pitfall.

She was sure I was wrong. You likely think I'm wrong as well!

But consider this--having the mind in control of food choices works only as long as you are able to keep your mind reigned in. Herein lies the problem, because the mind likes to wander. In fact, wandering is what minds do best. That is the nature of minds.

And, when the mind wanders, it also likes to fanaticize.

Meanwhile, you have learned that you must use your mind to decide when, what and how much you need to eat. The mind behaves initially. But soon enough, the mind begins its wandering and fantasizing.

Have you ever found yourself, fully committed to your eating plan yet thinking, indeed fanaticizing, about all those forbidden foods you decided not to eat?

The truth is that your ever powerful mind is capable of imagining unlimited quantities of forbidden foods. You can probably imagine rooms full of all your "bad" foods. From there, it is just a short hop, skip and a jump before your mind has decided it has to have some of those foods.

Some of them?

No, it wants all of them! (Remember, your mind loves to fanaticize.)

The mind then sets out plotting how it will get those foods and when.

Meanwhile, the body, by its very nature, has a limited capacity to consume and enjoy those foods. It can comfortably only eat a cup or two or three, depending on what the food is, before it starts to get uncomfortable.

Meanwhile, the mind is saying:

- “Yeah, but this is so good.”
- “Gosh, we haven’t eaten that in a while, go for it!”
- “You shouldn’t be eating it anyway, so go ahead and eat all of it.”
- “You have no self-control and are a loser. Who cares, just eat it.”

The mind has no built-in limits around food. For most people, using the mind to control your food means that there will be times when it takes over and pushes you to eat and eat and eat.

Meanwhile, the body has natural, built-in limits around food. And the body is constantly communicating those limits. For instance, you feel satisfied when we eat well and increasingly uncomfortable as you eat past that.

The body is subtle, this is true. And if you have spent years ignoring the body and depending on the mind manipulating food, calories and portions, you may not trust that the body is capable of causing you to lose interest in food, get bored with it, and just walk away. But that is exactly what happens with children (who have not had these mechanisms interfered with). You still have them on board as well.

The mind has no limits, the body has built-in limits just waiting for you to reconnect with them.

Which one do you want in charge of *your* eating?

A New Clarity But Not Sure What To Do

Robin began to see how her body had a limited capacity to enjoy all those foods her mind was dreaming about. She also agreed that her body did not actually want to be uncomfortable, nor did it enjoy eating past full. She began to watch what her mind was doing, and started to see that her mind was the culprit.

As she realized it was her mind that pushed her to keep eating, and became ready to stop giving her mind all that power.

But, she was not entirely convinced that her body could successfully guide her. Plus, she wasn't sure how to listen to her body and was especially concerned that she did not know how to access the "stop" signal to ensure she quit eating.

In the past, Robin would eat to the point where she would have to numb out to deal with the discomfort of overeating. This is what I call "going unconscious." Unfortunately, this would also allow her to keep eating. But, she began to realize her body was not pushing her to eat into discomfort and numbness--it was just trying to survive the mind's push to keep eating.

She still wondered how she would ever quit overeating. But, she was clear that the old way wasn't working.

With this new awareness, Robin began keeping a Hunger Scale Journal ([available as a free download at www.EatingWisdom.com](#).) She began to realize how she did not recognize hunger until it was extreme, at which point it was harder to manage her eating. We discussed how possibly her difficulty with overeating came, in part, from getting overly hungry.

She tried to stay below 1400 to 1500 calories a day and when she did, would make comments such as “I can’t be hungry after all I’ve eaten,” and “That was so much, I must be full, why do I want more?”

This is a common problem. Her head was telling her it was enough, but her body knew that was not right and asked for more fuel. She felt those requests were out of line and tried to block them. On some level, she was still worried that her hunger was out of control and considered herself insatiable.

At this point, we needed to dig into her perceptions of hunger and fullness to see what was keeping her from moving forward.

The following is a transcript of a session I had with Robin that I reprint with permission. The session is slightly edited for readability, and names and all identifying information have been changed.

Nutrition Therapy: Hunger Waves and How to Quit Eating When Satisfied

This session started with Robin revisiting concerns that intuitive eating would work.

Robin: I'm really struggling. I ate between 1400 and 1500 calories each day, and I really do believe that was more than enough. I know you're going to say that is too low, but I am terrified of eating more than that. I'm sure I'll blow up. I think I've ruined my metabolism and I'm afraid I'll never lose weight. Besides, I felt full when I ate and I was almost never hungry this week.

Karin: I realize you want to lose weight, but I think 1400 to 1500 calories is not enough food to prevent binging—that you will eventually binge because you are not eating enough. Yet, I hear you, it seemed like you were eating enough because you weren't aware of hunger.

Robin: Well, I do know that at times I don't feel hungry, but on other days, I'll eat the exact same amount and feel ravenous. I don't understand it.

Karin: It's common to not feel much hunger during the initial phase of trying to be "good" when eating, often called the "honeymoon phase." Everything seems wonderful. You are able to ignore hunger. You feel in control. You believe you will be able to eat this way forever, or at least until you reach your goals.

Robin: Well, yeah, that seems to happen. Two weeks ago, I was doing well. Then I went to dinner with friends, and all I could think about was what they were eating. I ended up ordering really unhealthy food.

This past week, I didn't go out with anyone, and my food was much better. Why can't I just keep eating like that? I don't feel hungry, so why do I suddenly want to eat when I'm around food? I don't know what's wrong with me, it's really scary.

Karin: It's possible that you didn't feel hungry because you were on the honeymoon and tuned it out. That feels good for a while. But sooner or later, your need for fuel will get louder, and if you do not understand it, or know how to respond appropriately, you will feel out of control.

Robin: What do you mean?

Karin: Well, when hunger starts, it is subtle and easy to ignore, like a gentle tap on the shoulder. When you ignore it, it will go away for a while. Then it will come back and tap again, this time more insistently. Your hunger will go away yet again, only to come back even stronger. You may interpret these "hunger waves" to mean you were not hungry to begin with.

Robin: You mean like when I think I'm hungry, but keep working and then the hunger goes away?

Karin: Exactly, and it's important to understand hunger waves. When your body signals that it needs fuel and you don't respond by eating, your body figures there is a good reason.

In survival terms, wanting to lose weight is not a very good reason. Hiding from a dinosaur, on the other hand, is a very good reason. So is, "I've got to finish this report."

You don't need the pain of hunger to distract you while hiding from the dinosaur or finishing that report, so the body tells hunger to back off. When it comes back, it is stronger because you have used up some fuel in the interim. Now your body is even hungrier.

When the hunger wave returns, you may try to ignore it by distracting yourself, drinking coffee, chewing gum, or eating something very low in calories. You may even become numb to hunger.

Your body is convinced you are doing something important or something really bad must be happening for you not to take care of yourself.

It still does not want to distract you with the pain of hunger, so it pushes hunger underground.

You may not feel hunger, but now you will experience what I call "backdoor hunger." You'll find yourself thinking about food more often -- lingering over recipes in magazines, drawn to cookbooks or food networks on TV. You'll notice food more readily, in stores, at restaurants, in the movies, and on TV. You'll be sensitive to what others are eating. You'll overhear food related conversations.

You are thinking more and more about food, which can feel scary.

So you retaliate, and try to feel in control, by focusing on your weight, your diet, calories, what you will eat, what you will not eat, etc. You will think about your next meal, which seems like good planning, but you are actually trying to manage the intrusive food thoughts caused by the backdoor hunger.

People often think this is emotional hunger, but it isn't. If you won't listen to your body directly, it has to find another way to communicate with you, which is the backdoor hunger.

Robin: I know exactly what you're talking about. Sometimes it seems like I think about food all day long. But I think it's emotional. It's a gnawing emptiness. I just feel driven to eat and keep thinking about what's in the fridge. It drives me crazy. Then sometimes, all I can think about is eating junk food. It won't go away, it just keeps building, and I hate it. Sometimes I drink coffee or diet soda and the feeling will go away—at least for a while—which is one way I know it's emotional.

Karin: Robin, I'm wondering if the gnawing feeling that you're interpreting as emotional hunger is actually your physical hunger.

Robin: How could that be? I'm not hungry. I've eaten enough, more than enough. It's a mouth hunger, not a body hunger. This is what happened when I was doing CrossFit and I did so well. I was almost never hungry, and I think it was because the diet was so high in protein. Protein is supposed to help you feel full, and not get hungry so often.

Karin: I'm wondering if you actually pushed your hunger underground, and as long as you could hold it underground, you were able to follow the CrossFit program. Then the hunger waves got so strong that you felt out of control and start bingeing. But only because you were overly hungry and did not know it.

Robin: Well, yeah, if I could just quit bingeing, I think everything would be okay.

Karin: Actually, Robin, it's the other way around. You need to pay attention to your hunger and quit under-eating in order to quit overeating.

Robin: I don't think I can do that.

Karin: But wouldn't you feel more in control if you knew what was going on? Right now it seems you ignore hunger as long as you can, then the backdoor hunger starts to get to you. You begin to weaken, and then find yourself bingeing, right?

What if you knew you were hungry? What if you felt the early cues, what I call the "Early Warning Signals"? What if you took care of hunger before you were so ravenous? You might eat less in the long run because you avoided bingeing.

Robin: I see your point about being overly hungry and bingeing. But I'm sure yesterday was emotional eating. I ate well all day and then binged at night after my boyfriend left. It's not working out with him, and I feel so frustrated about that. Obviously, that was emotional eating.

Karin: I know you've been trying to make things work with him, and that is definitely an emotional situation. But let's look at your food that day. You binged at 8:30 pm. Prior to that, you had eaten only 1290 calories. That amount of food would leave you susceptible to feeling overly hungry later in the day, and to binging. You actually needed more food.

Robin: Yeah, but then I really blew it. You said it was a total of 2600 for the day, and that's way more than I need, so I still think it was emotional.

Karin: Okay, let me ask you a hypothetical question. Let's say that you began eating that night after your boyfriend left, but only ate half of what you actually binged on. And at that point, if you knew, without a doubt, that you had NOT eaten enough to put on weight, that you had eaten the exact amount that would properly fuel your body and NO more, would you have eaten the other half of the binge?

Robin: Well, I knew I had blown it and figured I'd start again the next day, so I just kept eating. If I had known for certain I had not blown it, that I had done NO damage, there is a chance I would not have kept eating.

Karin: One cool thing about being in touch with hunger and fullness is that you can know, without a doubt, that you have not blown it. If you realized you were actually hungry in this situation, you would also have known you were still hungry after your boyfriend left. You could have eaten just the right amount to satisfy that hunger. You would have eaten less than you did by ignoring your hunger!

Integrating Intuitive Eating

This session shows how nutrition therapy explores the issues, gently looking at what is in the way of achieving your goals. We could chat about Robin needing more calories and begin making plans on how she will get those calories, but she needs to feel empowered - she needs to understand the issues clearly so she can interpret what is going on with clarity (and not with the disordered thinking so common around food and nutrition in our culture). Only then is she freed up to make the choices she truly wants to make.

Slowly, Robin began to move past those issues that were blocking her progress.

Robin began to realize that what she thought was emotional hunger was actually physical hunger. And that her belief that she had overeaten contributed to her continued eating.

When she began to pay attention to her hunger and eat before she became too hungry, she found she had more control over her food intake. Not only was it easier to notice and stop eating when full, but she also realized she had more ability to choose the food she really wanted, rather than just going for the “junk food.” She was able to slow down and make an informed decision about what to eat.

The turning point came when she got through Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years with no overeating and no weight gain. She was thrilled, saying she usually gained between 5 and 10 pounds during those times. It was the first time since she was a young teen that she had not gained weight during the holidays. Food just did not hold the same level of interest it had in the past.

She watched others taking several desserts after eating large dinners and realized she was satisfied with dinner. She had no need or desire to eat past full, even if it was dessert. And knowing she could have dessert later when she wanted it made it easy to not have any.



After that, she jumped into intuitive eating with both feet. By March, she was essentially free of eating issues. She had not binged in 6 months and was able to eat when hungry and quit when satisfied. She had started to lose a little weight. For a while, she was disappointed that weight was not falling off as it had when she was doing CrossFit. However, she came to realize she was more comfortable with herself than she had been in years, and that she was finally, truly, in control of her food.

She enjoyed being freed up from constantly thinking about food and eating and weight, and knew she could do this for the long haul. She loved that she was able to listen to the expert within—her own eating wisdom.

Finding Your Eating Wisdom

Robin learned to eat with wisdom, her wisdom, instead of asking her mind to follow someone else's advice of what and how much she should be eating.

What about you? Are you ready to use your own eating wisdom to eat intuitively?

I hope you see the value of listening to your body rather than your mind. Relearning how to listen and trust your body takes practice. And, if needed, nutrition therapy can help you get there.

Be kind and compassionate with yourself as you relearn this eating style. Learning to handle food without tension, knowing how much food feels right for you, and being able to quit eating when you are comfortably satisfied is the most wonderful freedom.

For some, understanding they can trust their body to guide them is enough to start this journey.

Most people, however, have been so indoctrinated in our traditional views of weight and eating that they need help to reconnect with, to accurately interpret, and to successfully use hunger and satisfaction signals.

If that is the case, following are some suggestions on how to move forward.

Learning Intuitive Eating

Fortunately, there are quite a few resources out there for you let go of old eating patterns and become an intuitive eater, including online courses, books, handouts and individual nutrition therapy.

Look for my new book, *Nutrition and Disordered Eating: What You Need to Know*, available in 2022, to learn exactly what needs to happen for your recovery from a nutrition perspective. This book will be for those suffering as well as their loved ones and support system (who often think all you need is a meal plan and you're done.). It is critical to understand all that is involved in this specialized therapy so you get the best help available.

Take advantage of our online courses: [Intuitive Eating: How to Escape Diet Culture and Become an Empowered Eater](#) and [Making the Hunger Fullness Scale Work For You](#).

You can also visit our website for free handouts and articles. Make sure to download the [Hunger Fullness Scale](#) for a description and overview of hunger and fullness signals (including hunger waves, backdoor hunger and early warning signals), and the [Hunger Scale Journal](#), an easy way to keep track of your eating and hunger ratings.

Check out the excellent book, [Intuitive Eating by Tribole and Resch](#).

Also read [Breaking Free from Emotional Eating by Roth](#), a book I first read in 1984. *Breaking Free* set me on the path of recovery by introducing the idea that I could actually regulate my own food intake. Her book is even more relevant today.

I also recommend [Anti-Diet: Reclaim Your Time, Money, Well-Being, and Happiness Through Intuitive Eating](#) by Harrison. I haven't read it, but I got it from the library and looked through it and was impressed. I have seen her articles online, so I know the book will deliver.

If you need additional support or guidance, please call us at 352.371.8181 for a free 20-minute consultation. You can tell us about what you want to accomplish, and we can explore what might be most helpful for you. We can refer you to resources, and we also provide individual counseling, both online and in the office.

Don't hesitate to call. We can provide guidance that is specific to your individual needs to help you make sense of all this and to move through the process faster.

If you choose another nutritionist, make sure they are highly skilled and experienced in the nuances of working with hunger and fullness signals. You might take a look at a chapter I wrote in Carolyn Costin's book, *The Eating Disorder Sourcebook*, titled [Finding a Nutritionist Skilled in Treating Eating Disorders](#) (you can read it at that link). Or, find much more detail in *Nutrition and Disordered Eating: What You Need to Know*, available at our website in 2022.

And, yes, this is initially more difficult than looking up a new eating plan and trying to follow it, but it is the only process that can become second nature, and the freedom you gain from following your eating wisdom is well worth every effort.

Wishing you a healthy life guided by your eating wisdom!

About Dr Karin Kratina

Dr. Karin Kratina is a nationally recognized nutrition therapist, author and speaker who is known for her groundbreaking work with intuitive eating and eating disorders. She co-authored the first professional book on intuitive eating, *Moving Away from Diets* (1996, 2003), and has authored multiple book chapters including "Treatment of Eating Disorders" in the *Handbook of Medical Nutrition Therapy: The Florida Diet Manual*. (You can review her publications and international lectures at www.EatingWisdom.com.)

But things were not always so good. In fact, a degree in nutrition and Masters in exercise physiology did nothing to fix her eating problems. It was not until she turned her back on that education and developed an entirely new approach to eating and weight management that she was able to end the food craziness. She brings this new approach to her work with clients to heal emotional eating, disordered eating, body image issues and weight concerns.

Dr. Kratina also holds a PhD in Symbolic Anthropology and a Graduate Certificate in Gender Studies from the University of Florida. Always interested in bringing new healing modalities to her clients, she became a Somatic Experiencing Practitioner as well as a Certified Enneagram Teacher. She uses both of these modalities in her work with clients.

Her passion is to help others break free of eating issues and discover a sense of peace and freedom with eating. She helps clients discover their "eating wisdom," and develop a natural eating style that is enjoyable and easy to live with so they can successfully manage food and weight. She wrote this book in the hopes that you too, will find your eating wisdom and peace with