

What is Normal Eating?

Natural eating, otherwise called “normal” eating, is different for everyone. Everyone has their own intuitive sense of what feels right for them.

Often people who have developed an eating disorder feel so far removed from eating well, that they forget what normal eating looks and feels like, and question whether this is something that they can ever get back to.

In the quest to re-establish natural eating patterns, it is important to work towards what feels right and intuitive for you. At times this can be tricky as you will need to navigate between the competing demands of what you know is right for you and what the eating disorder would like you to do. The right treatment team can help you to navigate your way back to natural and normal eating.

“Normal eating is going to the table hungry and eating until you are satisfied. It is being able to choose food you like and eat it and truly get enough of it - not just stop eating because you think you should. Normal eating is being able to give some thought to your food selection so you get nutritious food, but not being so wary and restrictive that you miss out on enjoyable food. Normal eating is giving yourself permission to eat sometimes because you are happy, sad or bored, or just because it feels good. Normal eating is mostly three meals a day, or four or five, or it can be choosing to munch along the way. It is leaving some cookies on the plate because you know you can have some again tomorrow, or it is eating more now because they taste so wonderful. Normal eating is overeating at times, feeling stuffed and uncomfortable. And it can be undereating at times and wishing you had more. Normal eating is trusting your body to make up for your mistakes in eating. Normal eating takes up some of your time and attention, but keeps its place as only one important area of your life. In short, normal eating is flexible. It varies in response to your hunger, your schedule, your proximity to food and your feelings.”

By Elly Satter

(in her book ‘Secrets of Feeding a Health Family: How to Eat, How to Raise Good Eaters, How to Cook’)

Challenge Yourself

It can be helpful to start by reflecting on what normal healthy eating used to look like for you, before the eating disorder.

- When, where, what and how regularly did you eat?
- How many meals/snacks would you typically have in a day?
- Were you a grazer or did you eat main meals and snacks?
- What were the timings of meals/snacks like?
- Did you have an awareness of the sensations of hunger and fullness?
- What were your favourite foods, sweet treats and desserts?
- What sort of emotions did you feel from food and from what types of foods?
- Could you eat when you were happy, sad, bored or just because you felt like it?
- What happened when you felt stuffed or uncomfortably full?
- What was your overall feeling around your relationship with food?
- What are you currently doing that is moving you towards normal healthy eating?
- What is one thing that you could do to move towards normal healthy eating?

Here are some goals to help you return to normal eating:

- Trial a ‘fear food’
- Eat something new or different
- Eat in a social setting
- Challenge a food rule (for example, the timing of your meals/snacks)
- Include a previous ‘favourite food’ into your meal plan
- Improve your awareness around hunger and fullness cues

