

Surviving the Holidays- An Intuitive Eaters Guide

The holiday season is officially here. The holidays are meant to be the most wonderful time of year, but when you are focused on your weight and following a diet, it can become a battleground full of forbidden foods and willpower. You can feel like you are one bite away from sabotage or slip into “I’ll be good in the new year.” This can create a lot of all or nothing eating. This sort of eating is usually mindless, often with excessive “splurges,” that fold into months of being disconnected from food and your body. When January comes, the “clean up” from the damage that has been done begins.

There are a lot of layers when it comes to holidays and eating. There are the specialty foods, all the desserts and sweets, the distant visiting family members, the friends, the parties, the big meals, and all the emotions tied into these. The holidays alone bring emotions with them. Sometimes it may feel like food is the only soother to get you through these events in these several months.

I hope that this guide will help you navigate this holiday season more kindly and lovingly, keeping the principles of Intuitive Eating in mind. The holidays do not have to be a time of guilt, failing, or agony with food. It can be a time to enjoy the celebrations and all the deliciousness that comes with it. You can stay connected to your body and have an awareness of how your behaviors with food are. Mindfulness and permission are the key, as well as staying very curious and having a lot of compassion with yourself as you go through this holiday season, maybe for the first time, without the chains of a diet mentality.

The Gift of Permission

For some people, the mere presence of the special holiday foods that only come out at this time of year, feel impossible to control yourself around. These foods might be loaded with memories from childhood, have had months of anticipation, and, most likely, are delicious.

One of the issues with holiday foods is that they are often limited to being served only during the holiday season. This, of course, is what makes these foods so special. But what this creates is a feeling of deprivation, when it comes to sitting down and eating these foods, it's game on! Now is your only chance, so you are going to have every last bite of it. For some, that's the fun of it. But if you are one to leave the table with a lot of guilt and shame, then there isn't much joy in that.

An important point to bring to attention is that it is **not** a matter of having enough "willpower." When you are deprived of any food, whether it be the pumpkin pie, stuffing, bread, Oreos, or a bag of Doritos, when you are around it, you WILL overeat on it. If you know your availability of these foods is limited, it becomes like "last supper eating," every time you are around those foods. You will almost always walk away extremely full, wanting more and feeling really guilty. It is this, which creates the illusion that you do not have willpower around these foods. When, in fact, it is the deprivation of these foods that creates this relationship.

So, what can Santa put under the tree for you this holiday season? Permission, beautifully wrapped up in mindfulness. If there is a food you tend to struggle with during the holidays, making it outside that holiday can help you when it comes to being around that food. Make the stuffing with Tuesday night's dinner, make an apple pie or cookies with the kids. Whatever that food may be, **making it to eat with permission** is a really helpful exercise. The goal is to help you connect to the *permission* of the food, but also to take away the "I can't control myself" feeling around it. Practicing this before you are sitting at the holiday table when you are surrounded by ten other people or that relative that you can't stand has importance. There are so many other factors that come in when you are with company, especially emotions. You are practicing a skill to be connected within yourself. This will help you have a higher chance of being able to do that while you are with others.

If it feels like there isn't enough time to make the holiday food that feels difficult, practicing it with other foods that feel like a struggle can be helpful. Maybe pick the cookies, ice cream, chips, whatever it is. Follow all the same steps below and see what happens. Be curious about it.

If you decide to try this food experiment, the key is to be **VERY connected and mindful** while you are eating. Try putting it 30-60 minutes after a meal, so you are not too hungry going into it. The purpose is connecting to the food. When you prepare it beforehand, check-in with how you are feeling? Are you excited, nervous, anxious? Eat the food slowly, deliberately, and without distraction. This means no television, phone, or screen. Sit at the table, counter, where ever you feel comfortable, and can be connected. Be conscious with each bite. Ask yourself, what flavors do I taste? What textures do I feel? Really be mindful. Are you aware of when the taste of the food changes? Is there a point that it doesn't taste as good as the first couple of bites? What would it be like to stop here, knowing you can have more later or tomorrow? Does that create anxiety or do you feel reassured? Be really curious with what emotions come up for you. There is so much information in that. If anxiety is present, that may show how much deprivation there is.

Maybe some memories come to mind associated with this food from when you were little. Does that make you feel happy, sad, or nostalgic? Does eating that food bring pleasant feelings back from that time, or does it make you want to numb from what comes up for you? Or is this you're only shot to have this food, so you need to eat as much as you can of it? Again, be **curious** about it. When you stay in that curious place, you'll find more answers than you realize. The next day, repeat and check-in to see if there is anything that you would change to help yourself be more connected.

The key to the curiosity is to have compassion with yourself. You are working on your relationship with this food. It may be really messy and not go "perfect." That's ok. Staying compassionate is one of the hardest things to do when you are used to being so judgmental and critical of yourself. But this shift is such a kinder way to be with yourself. This shift with compassion may take a while to integrate, but it will take you to a far greater place of peace than you could have ever imagined.

Emotions

The emotions that come along with the holidays can sometimes feel like you are caught up in the magic of the season or that a lump of coal got left in your stocking or in somewhere in between. There can be a vast span of feelings that come up during this time, from excitement and happiness to anxiety and sadness. When you tend to be an emotional eater, this is a time when it feels like you are surrounded by food and may feel like there is no way out. So how can you take good care of yourself during this time?

Be aware of your feelings.

The recognition of your emotions is one of the most honoring things you can do, especially as an emotional eater. If the emotions that come up for you are uncomfortable, you are likely to try to stuff them down. Whatever emotion that comes up for you, can you be aware of when you are using food to soothe the emotion? You do not necessarily have to change the behavior, even though that may be the desired outcome. You must first be aware of when you are using the food to soothe even if it's after the fact. Can you come from a place of curiosity versus judgment? Can you try to understand the emotion more, and why are you trying to numb it? When you bring more attention to the emotion, you are becoming more self-aware. You are drawing that connection together of the food and the desire to soothe the uncomfortable emotion versus staying in an unconscious place of emotional eating. Eating may feel like it is the only option to make yourself feel better. Sometimes when we feel like we have to fight against this eating so hard, it can turn into a worse situation than if you were eating with the awareness that you are to use the food to soothe. Nothing is right or wrong. I am not saying you do not emotionally eat. If you are an emotional eater, it's going to happen. What I am proposing, is can you become more aware of your desire to eat when you are feeling emotional so that you can start to bridge the space for you to ask yourself, "Am I aware of what I am doing?" Could you sit with the discomfort of the emotion a little bit longer and tolerate the uncomfortable and maybe try to understand the emotion? Or could you find something else that could distract you? This awareness allows you to create more space to be open to other options than just eating.

Keeping your boundaries

How often, whether it be at a family gathering or work party, are you drawn into a conversation that you do not want to have? Whether that is about politics, your love life or diet, and body talk. Be aware of the boundary you hold or do **not** hold when you find yourself in this situation. You have the right to walk away from any conversation that does not feel comfortable or is a topic you do not wish to discuss. If you find it hard to set that boundary, be aware of how that may impact eating and self-care. If you tend to have a hard time with boundaries and tend to have a hard time saying 'no' and are a people pleaser, eating will often be the soother to numb that irritation, anger, or frustration. Learning to say 'no,' setting boundaries, and take up the space that you are meant to have is a beautiful skill to learn.

The two sides of guilt

Guilt that comes with holiday eating can come in two forms. Either feeling guilty about the food you are eating or being guilted into eating more than you want. Both can create a lot of turmoil. The key in either of these is to stay connected and do what is best for you.

This may look like saying no to the second helping of stuffing offered multiple times or passing on the dish that you know doesn't make your body feel well, even though Aunt Mary slaved all day over it. You do not have to do anything or eat anything that is not honoring *you*. Your only agenda needs to be staying true and connected to you. Remember that.

On the flip side, you have the right to enjoy and savor every bite of your meal. You have the right to the second serving of whatever deliciousness you want more of. You have the right to eat the pumpkin pie **and** the cookies for dessert. I just encourage you to be mindful. Stay connected. Listen to when your body is saying it is full. Give yourself permission to have more later if you want. There are no rules, only YOU guiding you and your decisions. This consciousness also creates the awareness of when you may be in the "f-you" eating. When you may be eating just to piss off your mom because she made a comment about your weight or gave you that judgmental look, be aware of all of it. None of it is right or wrong. But it is how you are treating *YOU* that matters. When you are in that place, the only person you are hurting is you.

Remember that you are the only expert of you, no one else. You are the only one that knows how you feel emotionally and physically — honor that. Staying in a place of self-love and respect is the best present you can give yourself.

Logistics of Eating

When it comes to the holidays, there can be weird timing with meals that can make it feel difficult to figure out eating and can bring you to the table too hungry. It can be going to the holiday parties that only offer heavy appetizers that leave you feeling unsatisfied with the 3 pm dinner that has you conflicted whether on how to eat for the day. It can seem confusing and almost like a trap to navigate these events.

Lets first talk about holiday parties. Often, you can go into a holiday party, not knowing what is going to be served, or knowing it may be appetizers for a meal. You need to ask yourself how you tend to do in those situations. Some people can go with the flow and not feel a difference. And then there is everyone else that attends these events with varying degrees of stress and anxiety around the food. It can be from the foods being served to the timing, to the lack of *satiation* that you feel. It can be a myriad of things that can make it feel like one big set up. How I suggest navigating these events is if you are able, have a big snack before you go to the party. This may look like a sandwich, a protein smoothie, or a large handful of nuts-something that has good staying power. Walking into an appetizer meal, being really hungry, is a complete set up to overeating. Your body is wanting a meal and creating one with little finger foods can feel difficult and not satisfying. Prioritizing that large snack before or even having a small meal before-hand can be really helpful.

When it comes to odd mealtimes, restricting yourself throughout the day is not the answer. Of course, these holiday meals are going to be bigger. It's a celebration. It is meant to be a festivity rather than just a normal meal. It is how you come to the table that can make the difference. I suggest when you wake up, have a normal balanced breakfast. This means protein, carbs, and fat. Maybe this looks like eggs and toast, greek yogurt and granola, or a protein smoothie. You do not need to skimp on your day because dinner is so big. Three to four hours after breakfast have a light lunch. Again, do not restrict your day. This will help you not to be extremely hungry when you go to eat your meal. You must keep in mind, even though it seems like a good idea to eat less in the day to "save up" it creates such a set-up to overeating and getting to a painfully full place. That just piles on more guilt and shame with food and that eating experience.

When it comes down to eating the holiday meal, keep checking in with yourself. How are you feeling fullness wise? Be aware of your pace with eating. Try to be slower. Remember that if you are starving going into the meal, then you will eat fast. It's just instinct to do. I think most people walk away from a holiday meal, more full than normal. But if you can keep that in a more comfortable place than extremely full, than that is a more honoring place. Connecting, honoring, enjoying, those are the important parts of the meal.

The holidays bring so much with them. But guilt and self-sabotage do not have to be one of them. Staying intuitive is a skill you are reconnecting with. It is a gift that is already inside of you. You may need to unwrap a lot of layers to get to that place where you can trust yourself again. Intuitive Eating is a journey, a messy one. There is no right or wrong. It is willing to have the curiosity that allows you to start to replace the fear that diets have created with respect and compassion for yourself, and even help you find kindness and regard that truly nourishes you.