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Why Do I Binge Eat and What Can I
Do to Stop?

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Hi, I'm Andréa.

Today I want to share with you the most important first step to end binge eating. Since you're here you've likely reached a point where you're feeling done. You want to put binge eating behind you. Maybe you've reached your version of rock bottom, or maybe you've just woken up to the truth that you're dealing with something that you don't know how to fix. Either way you've had enough, and you're looking for change.

The problem is that even with the goal of change, most people will unknowingly keep the binge eating cycle alive by repeating the same behaviours that create urges to binge. What's worse is that without knowing why and how binge eating happens, you take your struggles personally believing it to mean that there's something wrong with you.

Today I want to help you understand why that is not the case. Binge eating is not personal, it's not a flaw, and it has nothing to do with willpower. Better yet, there's actually something you can begin doing today that, when developed as a habit, will create solid ground for you to stand on as you continue your journey to end binge eating for good.

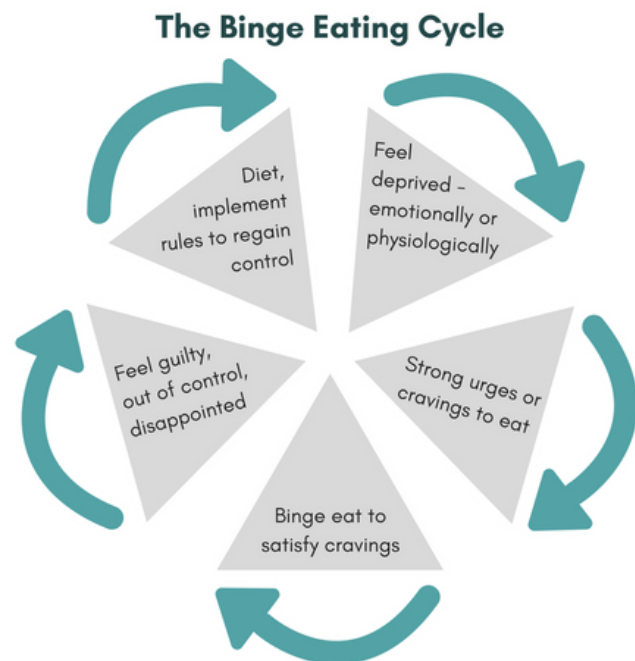
I hope this information is easy to follow and gives you the support you need today. If you have any questions or would like to connect please email me at coaching@andrealussing.com.

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What most people don't know is that binge eating lives in a cycle. One way that cycle is maintained and strengthened is through the act of trying to 'make up for' or undo the binges. In other words, when people skip meals, over-exercise, commit to a 'fresh start' or begin a new diet plan after a binge, they're unknowingly following the binge eating cycle and setting themselves up to binge again down the road. I'll share why.

That period after a binge can feel awful. The physical discomfort plus the emotional lows of shame, disappointment, frustration and guilt are difficult feelings to manage. For this reason, creating a plan seems like the best way to move forward after a binge to 'fix' those bad feelings. However, as most of us know, those plans and attempts to regain some control are short-lived and eventually you are back to where you started- hand-to-mouth in a binge. So the perspective needs to change, and you have to understand why you are bingeing in the first place, why you have urges to binge, and why those urges are so strong that they overtake any food rules, plans or guidelines of eating that you've set out for yourself.



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Why do I binge eat?

Most people chalk up bingeing to a lack of willpower or an inability to control themselves- a personal flaw of some sort. What people don't understand is that binge eating is a normal response to perceived food scarcity, caloric restriction, or weight loss. Binge eating is a survival instinct that is controlled by the 'cave-man' or 'reptilian' brain. This part of the brain overrides the rational, thinking part of your brain- the part that says "I'm not going to binge today". When in competition, the cave-man brain will always win because its goal is survival. Urges to binge are activated when this part of the brain senses a threat. This threat can come in two different ways.

1) *Dieting, weight loss or over-exercising triggering binge eating:*

It is natural for our weight and bodies to change over time and have slight fluctuations. However, for the most part our body has a 'set point'. That is, our body has a natural weight that it will do its best to keep.

I want to explain this to you in some detail so that you can really change your assumptions about why you binge eat. So, to understand this you can imagine your body as a thermostat trying to maintain a comfortable 20 oC. If the outside temperature went up to 30 oC, the air conditioning would kick in to re-establish the desired 20 oC. On the other hand, if the windows are left open on a cool day and the temperature drops, the furnace would rev up eventually bringing the temperature back to 20 oC.

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So the same way a furnace or air conditioner would adjust for outside changes in the temperature, your body does this too with your weight. Through body cues and instincts beyond your rational thought and decision making process, you will naturally be motivated to eat more or less and your metabolism will adjust depending on whether your weight has decreased or increased in an attempt to re-establish your body's natural set-point*.

**Note, this is a very simplified explanation of the lipostat model in a balanced body as explained in 'The Hungry Brain' by Stephan J. Guyenet, PhD, and is relevant to understand that our binge urges can be natural and instinctual and beyond our rational mind.*

I can hear you asking, so I'll comment right now on this question: *If the description above is accurate, why doesn't my body encourage me to stop eating when I gain weight? Why do I still feel like bingeing even when I know I've been eating too much to begin with?* The short answer to this is that bingeing and compensating for binges dis-regulates your appetite and creates an imbalance in your body signals. Further, it is more threatening to the body to lose weight (thus reacting with binge urges), than it is to gain weight. And finally, after a period of time, binge eating can become a habit- no longer an issue of survival instincts but one of reward. These are all ideas worth addressing but for the sake of today, I'm focusing on the two specific reasons most people binge.

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Many people have their first bingeing experience after a period of weight loss. Ask yourself when the first time was that you felt overcome to eat in a way that felt like a binge? As weight decreases to a point that is lower than our body's natural set-point, or daily caloric needs are not being met, our inner 'thermostat' can kick in in an attempt to re-establish a weight balance.

Our thermostat acts on us in a few powerful ways. The first is through intense thoughts, desires or urges for certain foods. These thoughts can be intrusive in an attempt to lead you to find food (suddenly fantasizing about how good x,y,z would be), or they can increase in the presence of certain food (for example a co-worker brings in cookies and that's all you can think about). These thoughts are usually paired with a certain level of anxiety which acts as 'extra energy' that, in cave-man days, you would need to go and secure the food. Once the food is secured, survival instincts encourage you to eat as much as you can by increasing your appetite and decreasing your ability to sense fullness. This allows for a true 'binge' which would be necessary for survival if your energy needs were truly at risk or you were starving.

In short, when dieting, losing weight or restricting food, the body/brain interprets the event as a threat and turns on instincts that encourage you to think about food, secure it, and then binge. These instincts are completely natural, they are not personal, and their onset is incredibly common in dieters. This experience is no fault of yours, and has nothing to do with you as a person or your willpower.

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However, not everyone who binges can identify with calorie restriction or weight loss as a cause of their binge eating. And although there are many reasons why someone may turn to food including calming themselves, managing emotions, seeking pleasure or variety, or out of habit, for the sake of speaking to the most common reasons people struggle with binge eating, I want to focus on another body/brain based reason people may feel out of control around food.

2) 'Healthy eating' and 'off limit' or 'bad' foods as a trigger of binge eating:

The second reason people may find themselves bingeing is in their attempt to eat 'healthy', stick to a prescribed health plan, or labelling some foods as 'good' and others foods as 'bad' or 'unhealthy'.

This reason has two paths that may lead to binge eating. The first is physiological as with reason #1 above- in attempt to eat 'healthy', you may actually create a calorie deficit which is interpreted by your body/mind as a threat and your natural thermostat turns on to re-establish a weight or caloric balance. In basic terms, you find yourself having natural urges to over-eat in an instinctual effort to make up for under-eating.

The second way that attempting to eat 'healthy' can lead to binge eating, even if you are maintaining your weight and eating enough for your energy needs, comes down to an emotional interpretation of restriction. By saying to yourself "I'm not allowed to eat those foods", "those foods are bad", "that food is too unhealthy", etc, you are putting yourself in a position where eating those foods makes you feel like you've done something wrong..

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This strict 'on diet' eating can also create a higher sensitivity to richer, 'high-reward value' foods ('The Hungry Brain', Stephan J. Guyenet). In this case when facing yummy 'off limit' foods there can be an overwhelming urge, driven by reward centres in the brain, to eat more of that food than you otherwise may have. Since 'healthy' food is usually synonymous with 'lower-reward' food, it is perfectly natural for the body to binge on 'high-reward' food when it has access to it as the brain interprets it as more important.

It is quite common to want to make up for those experience with a re-commitment to a 'start fresh' or begin 'eating healthy' again. However this leads to an on-the-wagon / off-the-wagon scenario. In this pattern it is easy to rationalize 'indulging' since you know that tomorrow you won't be 'allowed' to eat that food again and your rational brain truly believes it will be able to stay in control in the face of these foods at another time.

In the book, 'Intuitive Eating' by Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch, this is called "last supper eating". This kind of eating (which may be synonymous with binge eating for some) happens with the most sincere belief that once you 'start fresh' you really won't eat those 'unhealthy' foods again. However, as most binge eaters or yo-yo dieters know, this on-again/off-again eating leads to many "last supper" eating events.

This controlled and structured eating of 'healthy' food seems to require no less than an A+ adherence, or else the emotions of guilt, regret and shame creep in. Furthermore, this A+ adherence goal makes it natural for the brain to encourage binges when there is access to rich food. This relationship with food, where the goal is to stick to a plan, sets

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the individual up to indulge in “last supper” binge eating, maintaining a cycle of restriction followed by binge eating. This cycle is a natural result of any structured eating plan, or micro-managed ‘healthy’ eating.

So which of these two reasons do you identify with most? Do you restrict to a degree that your instincts take over and urges to binge appear? Or do you micro-manage your diet only eating ‘good’ foods and then end up bingeing on ‘unhealthy’ foods when they’re around?

How can I interrupt these cycles which keep me binge eating?

Recovery from any form of disordered eating is a unique, multi-layered journey for each individual. That said, for those struggling with binge eating there is a necessary starting point that, when practiced, will provide you with a strong foundation to then focus attention on other areas of healing.

This first step is to calm your body’s own instincts that drive you to binge. This will signal to the body that you are no longer at risk of starvation, rapid weight loss or restriction and the hormones and neural-chemicals that previously created compelling urges to overeat certain foods will no longer be activated to such a degree.

When these instincts to binge are calmed, you will be more able to access the area of your brain that is responsible for rational and complex thought- the pre-frontal cortex.

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Many people don't realize that the brain accounts for 20-25% of our daily energy usage. When we under-feed ourselves, or create long periods of time without fuel (skip meals), we underfeed our brain and don't have the same capacity to make the choices that we want. When this area of your brain is back 'online', and the competition of survival instincts is calmed, you will be more able to make choices that you know will serve you.

So how do I calm these instincts and return my energy back to the part of my brain that can create change?

You may have understood already by now that the first step to overcome binge eating is to eat in a way that is not rooted in a 'less is more' approach and not rooted in any rigid plan or meal plans. You can label this goal "eating adequately" a term used by Brain Over Binge author, Kathryn Hansen. When you develop the habit of eating adequately, you create a change in your brain that quiets the instincts that have been leading you to overeat. Over time you will no longer feel compelled to binge, and urges will subside. Without urges, binge eating no longer feels necessary or desirable.

Before I continue with how to re-establish eating patterns that will serve you, I want to acknowledge the challenges that come with this first step. These challenges are mostly rooted in managing perfectionism. When it comes to eating the media or scientific influence of 'healthy' eating can get in the way of approaching eating as 'good enough'. When I work with clients I always tell them right away that the goal cannot be A+, the goal is a C grade. Challenge yourself to do 'good enough', become comfortable with the imperfect, and recognize that the desire for an A+ is what keeps most people stuck with their struggles with food.

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The second challenge to do with perfectionism is managing the thoughts that keep you believing that your body needs to be {insert: smaller/thinner/tighter/lighter/less cellulite/more muscular/flatter/healthier/etc.}. These thoughts may tell you that eating adequately is not in your best interest- that there must be another diet or food plan that can help you eat healthy that will be the ticket to both weight loss and ending binge eating. I'm here to tell you that those thoughts will be the voice of your disordered eating, diet culture rhetoric, and personal fears. Those thoughts are lies and will not serve you.

In order to eat adequately you need to put your desire for weight control aside so you can hold the greater goal of ending binge eating and re-establishing a positive relationship with food and yourself. When you start following through on doing what you've said you'll do, your confidence will begin to rise, your perfectionist mentality around food will soften, and you will open up to new areas of your feelings, thoughts and life that will help you continue healing on other levels.

How do I begin to eat adequately?

I cannot tell you exactly how to do this, as this is not about following someone else's plans. Eating is a uniquely personal thing. Only you know what feels good in your body, what foods you enjoy, and what values you hold around food. I can only give you guidance about what generally works, and some structure that may help you re-establish some useful patterns.

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1. Use the rule of 3s.

This rule acts as a good beginner's guide to 'how to eat adequately'. Aim to eat 3 meals a day, with 3 food groups in each meal, with 2-3 snacks per day, at intervals of around 3 hours. Using this structure is very helpful to calm survival instincts, and also to maintain continuous fuel to your brain. When you fuel your brain, you are more able to make good choices for your recovery.

2. Be aware that any kind of structured eating can turn into a 'plan' or a diet.

Make sure you leave room for spontaneous decisions based on what you 'feel like'. Play around with what meals are useful to structure and what meals aren't. Be sure to add in a variety of foods, and try to ask yourself what you really feel like eating as often as you can. The more you listen to your body vs. your diet-culture influenced brain, the more you'll be directed to a wide range of foods and be able to experience food for a combination of pleasure, fuel and satisfaction.

3. Focus on progress, not perfection.

A+ eating will not heal your relationship with food. Aim for a C. Make room for all kinds of foods, bringing awareness to what foods make you feel good, taste good and fuel your body.

4. Don't rely on hunger and fullness cues just yet.

You may not be able to notice hunger and fullness cues at this point. Don't attempt a 'hunger and fullness diet'- stick to the rule of 3s. Because of binge eating, and survival instincts, you cannot rely on structuring your eating around body-awareness at this

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point. However, these cues will evolve naturally and begin to guide you as your relationship with food changes over time.

5. Be honest.

Only you will know if you are taking full responsibility for using adequate and non-restrictive eating to calm your binge urges. You can use the rule of 3s, and still be under-eating. If binge urges continue to be powerful, check in with yourself and be honest. Are you still in the 'less is more' mindset? Are you still aiming to lose weight? Are you still avoiding foods you actually enjoy for fear that they're 'unhealthy'? If you are unable to make the leap to adequate eating alone, it's time to reach out to someone who can help you.

Instead of focusing on healing everything that may be playing a role your binge eating, my goal here today is to narrow your focus down to the most important piece of ending binge eating- eating adequately and stepping away from restrictive diets and mindset.

Once again, I know that emotions, trauma, thoughts, body-dissatisfaction, loneliness, depression, stress and more can all play a role in binge eating, but it is not useful to focus on these until instinctual urges are calmed down. Until this time, you will be fighting a losing battle. Our rational brain cannot win over our instincts. Adequate eating quiets the 'cave man' brain so we no longer feel compelled to binge eat, and fuels the rational brain so we can make choices that serve us as we continue our journey.

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Solving and healing other pieces of your binge eating puzzle becomes possible once you lay the foundation of adequate eating. Adequate eating acts as a frame, like completing all the edge pieces of a puzzle, which gives you a safe and solid structure to continue filling in the missing pieces of your recovery.

The journey to make peace with food, your body and yourself is a unique journey for everyone and has many layers. What I've outlined today is the foundational piece that makes it possible to work through whatever other layers there may be on your journey.

I hope this perspective will be of help to you. I know what it's like to not know why you are binge eating, and to assume that more control over what you eat is the answer. I also know that adjusting your perspective and your habits around food can be challenging which is why personal coaching can be incredibly useful for this transition.

If you'd like to share any feedback or insights you had while reading, I'd love to receive the mail. I can be reached in the following ways:

Email: coaching@andrealussing.com

Private messaging on Instagram: www.instagram.com/andrealussing.coaching/

Private messaging Facebook: www.facebook.com/andrealussingcoaching/

Website: www.andrealussing.com

I wish you all the best on your journey.

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About Andréa

Hi, I'm Andréa. I'm a life coach, an Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) tapping practitioner and a woman with lived experience of binge eating, bulimia and disordered eating. I coach people to overcome binge eating, emotional eating and overeating and finally make peace with food.

I've recently began a Masters degree in counselling so I can take what I've learned through coaching and apply it in professional settings.

I reside in beautiful Halifax, Nova Scotia (though my clients come from anywhere in the world thanks to the magic of online video calls). I spend most of my free time with my husband and son hiking, enjoying the ocean, camping and playing. I enjoy reading, having therapeutic conversations with friends, getting creative and being in beautiful place. I also volunteer with Eating Disorders Nova Scotia as a trained Peer Mentor.

To read about my journey with binge eating visit www.andrealussing.com.