

# They Rejected Diet Culture 30 Years Ago. Then They Went Mainstream.

Once considered radical, Elyse Resch and Evelyn Tribole’s method of intuitive eating has become the cornerstone of the modern anti-diet movement.

By **Michelle Ruiz**

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LOS ANGELES — It’s 6 p.m. on the patio at Il Moro, a twinkly-lit Italian gastro pub in West Los Angeles, and Elyse Resch and Evelyn Tribole are intuitively eating their dinner.

They start with warm, crusty bread, liberally dipped in olive oil, and then move on to salad, branzino and the penne tossed with little pillows of burrata that Ms. Resch ordered for the table. In accordance with one of intuitive eating’s 10 principles — “challenge the food police” — neither woman moralizes about the carbs.

“The first few bites of pasta are magic,” Ms. Resch said. After a few more, she shrugs, the allure starting to fade. That’s another principle: The less certain foods are forbidden, the less power they have over you.

Intuitive eating, as conceived by the dietitian-nutritionist duo, is the practice of renouncing restrictive diets and the goal of weight loss and encouraging people to tune into the intuition that governed their eating as toddlers. This includes satiating hunger rather than trying to suppress or outsmart it; feeling your fullness (and pausing mid-meal to assess it); and savoring, even seeking pleasure from, food. Among the other principles are addressing emotional eating, emphasizing movement over “militant exercise” and practicing “gentle nutrition” — minding moderation and balance in one’s diet, but not too harshly.

“You can have whatever you want,” explained Ms. Resch, 77. “You can have it for the rest of your life.”

The idea of eating freely was bold when Ms. Resch and Ms. Tribole, 63, co-wrote “Intuitive Eating: A Revolutionary Anti-Diet Approach” in 1995, an era when low-fat eating reigned. Twenty-eight years later, their manifesto urging people to “reject the diet mentality” and “respect” their bodies has become a cornerstone of the modern anti-diet movement, rebuking keto, paleo and cleanses and granting readers — and themselves — “unconditional permission to eat.”

“Intuitive Eating” has sold more than 700,000 copies since 1995, according to St. Martin’s Press, which published the fourth edition in 2020. The practice has been mentioned 1.4 billion times on TikTok, with bao buns and everything bagels proudly shared in “What I Eat in a Day While Intuitive Eating” diaries. Demi Lovato is among the celebrities who have credited intuitive eating with healing them from disordered eating.

The practice has been embraced by wellness influencers like Nicole Berrie, owner of New York’s plant-based convenience store Bonberi Mart — who cites it in the title of her new cookbook, “Body Harmony: Nourishing, Plant-Based Recipes for Intuitive Eating” — and co-opted by Gwyneth Paltrow, whose Goop Press published a guide to “intuitive fasting,” which Ms. Tribole and Ms. Resch said they do not condone. “I intuitively fast when I’m sleeping,” Ms. Resch joked.

There are more than 100 academic studies on intuitive eating, including a 2021 meta-analysis that found that the method was positively linked to participants’ body image, self-esteem and psychological well-being. And while the program isn’t promising better health metrics per se, some preliminary studies link intuitive eating to improved blood sugar and cholesterol levels and increased intake of fruits and vegetables.

Yet few doctors embrace it, as mainstream medicine remains staunchly in favor of weight loss for people who are overweight — much to the outrage of Ms. Tribole and Ms. Resch, and the growing army of anti-dieters who stand behind them.

## An Alternative to Food Obsession

When Ms. Tribole first began renting space in Ms. Resch's Beverly Hills office suite in 1993, both registered dietitians noticed that even the moderate meal plans they were trained to give patients — suggesting a ratio of food groups and recommending “healthy substitutions” like chicken in lieu of beef — were failing to stick. Ms. Resch recalled thinking, “I can't do this to people anymore.”

She related to her clients' struggles firsthand. In her 30s, before becoming a nutritionist, she had an eating disorder in which she starved herself and then binged. “I would try not to eat lunch, and in the afternoon, I couldn't take it anymore and I'd eat something and then feel so guilty that I'd broken my ‘willpower;” Ms. Resch said, adding that controlling her food had been an escape from her strained first marriage.

“Calculating calories,” she said, “totally took me away from the unhappiness I was feeling.”

In the 1990s, Ms. Tribole had been Columbia Pictures' resident nutritionist, working with actors to prepare them for roles; she declined to name any of them out of respect for their privacy. Even with private chefs and trainers, her celebrity clients struggled with formulaic meal plans.

Ms. Resch and Ms. Tribole found that diets only seemed to make people more obsessed with eating. They were heavily influenced by a 1945 experiment that put healthy men on a semi-starvation regimen and found that they became extremely preoccupied by food.

Together, Ms. Resch and Ms. Tribole imagined an alternative built on the opposite idea. “When you have permission to eat, and you know you can have it again, it doesn't become this last supper,” Ms. Tribole said.

Intuitive eating practitioners work on their own or with a dietitian; there are 2,000 certified intuitive eating counselors across 40 countries. They are told to throw away calorie-tracking apps and diet plans and to work on tuning in to physical signs of hunger, heeding “any noise or biological sensation or mood” that indicates it, from stomach growls to a slight headache, lack of mental focus or “grouchiness.”

Next, they work on eating whatever they crave, without deeming it “good” or “bad.” Make “peach pie equivalent to a peach,” the book says. “Observe how your body feels when eating this food and how satisfying it is to your tongue,” and actively seek pleasure from meals, paying attention to taste, texture, aroma; take “several deep breaths” before sitting down to eat, and savor food.

Once you've eaten, the book instructs, feel your fullness. “Listen for the body signals that tell you that you are no longer hungry,” it says. “Observe the signs that show that you're comfortably full. Pause in the middle of eating and ask yourself how the food tastes, and what your current hunger level is.”

People often worry that intuitive eating will lead to gluttony. “That is the greatest fear people have: ‘If I give myself permission to have what I want, I'll never stop eating it;” Ms. Resch said. At first, especially if they are used to restricting their diets, new intuitive eaters tend to gravitate to food that was previously off-limits and “eat beyond fullness,” Ms. Resch noted. Her guidance: Continue to give yourself “full freedom” to eat. She added, “get as many packages of Oreos as you want. Once people really sink into the sense that they're going to be able to have that food, and they stay present and they taste it, it doesn't take long before they realize, ‘Eh, I don't want so much of it’” anymore.

Intuitive eating is linked to the Health at Every Size movement, a perspective that de-emphasizes weight as a means of assessing people's health. "Accept your genetic blueprint," Ms. Resch and Ms. Tribole write in "Intuitive Eating." "Just as a person with a shoe size of eight would not expect to realistically squeeze into a size six, it is equally futile (and uncomfortable) to have a similar expectation about body size." Intuitive eaters may gain or lose weight or remain at the same weight, the authors said, but shedding pounds is never the goal.

A longitudinal study published in 2021 found that intuitive eating led to better psychological and behavioral health among people with anorexia and bulimia, and to lower odds of binge eating, fasting, taking diet pills and vomiting. "I think of intuitive eating as the goal of eating disorder recovery," said Dr. Jennifer Gaudiani, an internist in Denver who specializes in eating disorders and encourages the method to patients; she refers them to dietitians and therapists who use it in treatment. "People can be shocked to realize there's another way of thinking about food other than 'I should feel guilty; I need to deprive myself.'"

Jenae Davis, 25, an epidemiologist in Richmond, Va., was binge eating as a student at Virginia Commonwealth University in 2018 when she began intuitive eating as part of an intervention study there. Ms. Davis said that she had often engaged in binge eating to cope with stress but that the act of slowing down and savoring meals had helped her feel more in touch with her body's needs. "I want to feel hungry," she said. "I don't think I ever allowed myself that when I was binge eating."

The practice also allowed Ms. Davis to regain control around food. "When people who restrict themselves from eating cake get cake, they eat the whole thing, but if I have cake in my house, I'll eat a slice and be satisfied," she said.

The frequency of Ms. Davis's weekly binges began to decrease over the course of five years. "I don't want to say that it ever ends, although I haven't binged in a long, long time," she said.

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zozified her to “essentially binge eating,” Ms. Kish said, summarizing her resulting mentality as, “I should be able to eat anything, so I’m going to eat everything.”

Eating intuitively became an “excuse” to ignore nutritious foods, making her feel, at times, physically ill. “My mind might be telling me, ‘Hey, you should eat an entire pizza right now,’” she said. Typical indulgences never lost their charge. “I wish I had gotten to that point,” Ms. Kish said, “but I never did.”

Ms. Kish felt frustrated that the much-touted practice hadn’t worked for her, but she hesitated to comment about it on social media, for fear of backlash. Intuitive eating’s association with anti-dieting and the body acceptance movement make speaking out against it daunting, with anti-dieters on Instagram, Facebook and TikTok eager to discuss in the comments. “I try not to bring up the topic anymore,” she said. “I don’t want to be the bad guy.”

Asking people to rely on their own intuition to figure out what they should eat is “a lot of burden on an individual person,” said Andrew Kraftson, a clinical associate professor in the division of metabolism, endocrinology and diabetes and director of the weight navigation program at Michigan Medicine. “There is hormonal, neurobiological and metabolic dysregulation that can happen — your body is not always the north star” when it comes to knowing what’s good for you to eat, he said.

Dr. Fatima Cody Stanford, an obesity medicine physician at Harvard Medical School, praised intuitive eating’s guidance on attuning to your body. “If I’m looking at what my patients eat, I do have them think about what their body needs,” she said. The problem is, she said, it’s not the whole story; “it neglects the science of how the body regulates weight.” In people with obesity, one of the two brain pathways that regulate weight signals the body to eat more and store more weight, potentially clouding their intuition around food. “We want to listen to our bodies,” she said, “but listening to your body may be flawed.” (Dr. Stanford has served as an adviser for a number of pharmaceutical companies, a common practice for experts in the field.)

Asked about people for whom intuitive eating does not gel, Ms. Tribole suggested that they most likely weren’t practicing all the principles.

“I’ve had a lot of people have the false impression that intuitive eating is simply not dieting,” she said, rather than adopting the comprehensive guidelines of its 10 principles.

Dr. Stanford agrees with Ms. Resch and Ms. Tribole that “there are persons that have a predisposition to living in bigger bodies,” she said, citing research that found that about 80 percent of children born to two obese parents will themselves be obese, even when accounting for diet and exercise. Dr. Stanford differs, however, on intuitive eating’s rejection of weight loss and its potential health benefits.

“I find this to be very disturbing,” Dr. Stanford said. “If you know that you have a predisposition to diabetes, cancer, or any other chronic disease, and could modify it, would you? I think the answer is a resounding yes.”

Dr. Kraftson points to evidence in people with pre-diabetes showing that if they lose 5 percent to 7 percent of their weight, they reduce their chance of developing full-blown diabetes by 60 percent. Similar improvements are possible with other health concerns, including high blood pressure and sleep apnea. “You don’t need an 18-year-old beach body — a modest change in weight can have substantial health benefits,” he said.

Ms. Resch is unmoved by arguments that advocate for weight loss, even to address obesity. “Thinking about weight loss only disconnects people further from their inner wisdom about eating,” she wrote in an email.

Plus, she added, up to two-thirds of dieters regain more weight than they lost, and weight cycling — repeatedly losing and regaining weight — is linked to higher mortality rates, cardiovascular disease and hypertension.

## Eating as an Act of Resistance

When Ms. Resch and Ms. Tribole were shopping “Intuitive Eating” around to publishers, some bristled at the idea of an anti-diet book, according to David Hale Smith, the pair’s longtime literary agent. “There were a lot of rejections,” he said, “where people said: ‘This is really great information, but how are we going to sell this? There’s no seven-day slim-down plan.’”

Ms. Tribole said she had been “too scared” to write the book alone. Even after joining with Ms. Resch, “it felt risky, because this was so counterculture,” she said. “It’s still kind of counterculture now.”

In the fourth edition of “Intuitive Eating,” Ms. Resch and Ms. Tribole condemn America’s cultural focus on obesity as both racist and sexist. They cite “Fearing the Black Body,” a 2019 book by Sabrina Strings, a sociology professor at the University of California, Irvine, that argues that fatphobia is rooted in a history of white supremacy and patriarchy. In the United States, people are sold “stigma and shame” about their bodies, Dr. Strings said. With intuitive eating, she said, Ms. Tribole and Ms. Resch are among the voices “coming together to undo that oppression.”

Eating freely as a form of resistance was a part of the idea from the start, albeit in a way that was particular to its time. Ms. Tribole and Ms. Resch originally drew on second-wave feminism, connecting diet culture to the oppression of women. Susan Faludi’s 1991 book “Backlash” is among the feminist texts that helped shape “Intuitive Eating,” which was originally titled “Diet Backlash.”

Ms. Tribole had been a self-described “Title IX baby” who ran track at California State University, Long Beach, in the 1970s and went on to compete in the 1984 trials for the first women’s Olympic marathon. She likened combating sexism as a female athlete to countering diet culture. “We’re going up against a big system,” she said, “and just because it’s been done one way for a long time doesn’t mean it’s the right way to do it.”

Nearly 30 years later, societal barriers remain. “Who gets to comfortably and confidently give themselves permission to try everything?” said Liz Brinkman, a registered dietitian nutritionist and certified intuitive eating counselor in Phoenix. “If you are a fat woman walking into a restaurant ordering lasagna, chances are, someone is going to judge you. Someone might even walk up to you and say something.”

Ms. Brinkman was drawn to intuitive eating’s “freedom and flexibility,” she said, but in incorporating the method into her practice, she has come to feel that its principles “operate from unwritten assumptions” about people, including the notion that they “are adequately resourced with time, money, and a sense of agency,” she wrote in a blog post. Those assumptions apply to “a very privileged (and small) group of people.”

Ms. Resch and Ms. Tribole acknowledge that intuitive eating itself is a privilege, but they nonetheless see the practice as a form of empowerment for all clients. “We’re teaching them how to trust themselves,” Ms. Resch said.

After two leisurely hours at Il Moro, Ms. Tribole is officially full, “but dessert sounds really good,” she grins. There is flourless apple cake for Ms. Resch; a slice of chocolate cake for Ms. Tribole, who has a few bites and shares the rest. That she can stop there has made past dinner companions marvel, “You’re so good,” she said. “No,” Ms. Tribole replies. “I’m satisfied.”