

Why Self-Control is Not the Solution to Binge-Eating

Article is available on my Nutritionist Resource profile.

Is this you?:

- You feel like everyday is a battle not to search the cupboards
- You need to keep foods OUT of the house otherwise you know you will eat them all
- You can't be trusted around certain foods
- You feel like you could combat binge eating if only you had more willpower

I totally get it. Living with binge eating can be incredibly isolating, lonely, and pretty shame-filled. But it doesn't have to be that way.

You might have heard that "willpower" is key to overcoming binge eating. That if you just tried harder, worked smarter, actually stuck to your guns more, that you would never binge again. You could push off the urge to binge, and if you just do it for long enough, eventually you won't ever binge again.



But that's not really how it works. Your relationship to food is how it is for a reason - binge eating didn't fall into your life one day from the sky; I would guess you have a few reasons why you think you struggle with binge eating... Binge eating is in your life for a reason, it can't just go away if you just try harder or have more willpower.

And let's be real here, you do have willpower. You have tried to stop bingeing. We both know you have. You're not failing because you've tried everything to stop bingeing - you're just stuck. You're stuck because every online support group, every binge eating Facebook group, every professional you've ever spoken to about binge eating has probably told you to:

- "Just stop bingeing." - Geez, why didn't you think of that!?
- "You need to find a diet that works." - I'm guessing you have been on and off of diets for a LONG time.
- "You just need to try harder." - But we both know you are trying. It's not lack of trying that's keeping you stuck bingeing; you need a new approach.

What might be fueling binge eating, that's not lack of motivation.

Summary of section.

Please note: There are so many other reasons you might be binge eating, and as a nutrition professional, I'm only going to focus on food and body related reasons. Binge eating can also be due to psychological reasons, such as trauma.

- Physical hunger.

Before you roll your eyes and hit back on this article (!)- hear me out for a few more lines. You might think "there is no way I am hungry - I binge all the time!" In my experience, many people who binge eat aren't eating enough or regularly enough outside of binges.



Do you eat less outside of binges, or prepare for binges by eating less? Maybe you just feel so full after bingeing or the morning after bingeing that you physically couldn't eat a meal?

Any experienced binge eating nutrition professional will be interested in finding out how you eat outside of binges. Here are some of the things I might look out for:

- Lack of structure with eating. You don't eat on a regular schedule, which means some days you might skip meals or go hours (like 4+ hours) without eating anything.
- You eat sporadically and no day really looks the same - your eating is erratic, even outside of binges.
- There are clear windows where you're eating most of your daily intake - often this is nighttime. Are you trying to eat as little as possible during the day, or you eat "good/healthy" during the day, then you binge at night?
- The foods you eat outside of binges are only "healthy/clean/safe/good/boring" and your binge foods are exciting, tasty, your favourite foods, "bad/unhealthy/off-limits"

Often I hear people say, "I DO eat regularly" but when we delve into it, actually they're not. They eat regularly for a day or two, or they eat small portions and hope that's enough food. It might be helpful to know that it takes people who binge eat around 3-12 months of regular meals and snacks to reduce/stop binge eating.

That's why support from a binge eating nutrition professional might be invaluable in your recovery. Please do reach out to me for support on my Nutritionist Resource profile if you would like to inquire about working with me.

- All or nothing thinking.

This is another huge common culprit of binge eating. Before I dive into how I see this come in with my clients, think about how all or nothing thinking might be impacting you... Do you find yourself falling on and off a (often invisible) wagon? How does that affect you?

I'm guessing it doesn't feel great - an understatement if there ever was one!

All or nothing thinking often looks like:

- You try to be "good" after you've eaten something "bad."
- You eat really healthy all week, then you blow it off on the weekend. This might have been planned or you take a few bites of something and think "stuff it - I've blown it now, I might as well eat everything!"
- You measure your worth based on how you feel about your body that day, or comments others make.
- You are "on plan" for weeks or months, then you get sick of it and all the "progress" you made is lost.
- You announce (either externally or internally) that you're going on a diet, a lifestyle kick, a healthy eating regime, or you're going to quit sugar/alcohol/chocolate/carbohydrates but binge on all the forbidden foods later.
- You feel like if you don't have a perfect day of eating, you might as well blow it with a binge because "what's even the point?"
- You think nothing you do to be healthier is ever good enough.

Do you recognise yourself in any of these?

Most of my clients for sure do! They feel like if they can't be a perfect eater, someone who will never stop binge eating, someone who eats like a Princess in a cartoon (here I'm thinking about tiny plates of salad!) - that there's no hope. They just wish they could stop thinking about binging, stop actually binging, and only eat "healthy foods."

I invite you to think about where these expectations came from - did they come from your parents, nutrition education at school, magazines, films, social media? Who gave you the expectation that you need to eat "perfectly"?

Might this be fueling binge eating?

- Scarcity mindset

The final reason for binge eating I'm going to cover in this article is the scarcity mindset.

The scarcity mindset around food might be contributing to your binge eating because ultimately what it means is, feeling like you don't have an abundance of food to eat. Scarcity brings an urgency to eat as much of the food that's limited as possible. It's not a peaceful or pleasant eating experience - it's often charged and feels out of control, you might even feel like you're addicted to the food.



Could this be because you're avoiding or limiting foods you think of as unhealthy? Foods you binge on?

A scarcity mindset in my clients who struggle with binge eating often looks like:

- Ordering takeaway or eating a meal at a restaurant, and eating it while thinking "I shouldn't be eating this - I need to cut this out, why do I always do this!?"
- Buying foods (often "fun foods" like cookies, crisps, cake, doughnuts, or ice cream) and needing to eat it all to get rid of it, otherwise you will eat it for days and days.
- Filling your plate with "healthy" food like salad, vegetables, protein sources, or grains to avoid being hungry for "bad" foods later on.
- Craving something like a brownie, cake, or pizza, and trying to ward off the craving by eating low-calorie options or "air-food". But eventually ending up eating the food they wanted to begin with - and feeling super full and like they've failed.

When I help people with binge eating, one of my goals (if it's there, of course) is to help them move to a place of abundance. Sounds groovy, but what does that even mean!?

An "abundance mindset", rather than a scarcity mindset, means making peace with all foods and not placing any limits on eating - this means physically and mentally. You're probably thinking "how on earth can I eat in "abundance" when I binge eat!?" Let me tell you a bit about how I help clients do this:

- First off, this is not an overnight process. You can't just say to yourself "I have unlimited access to all foods, I'm no longer limiting foods or thinking foods are bad." And hey presto, no more binging. It's more like building up your relationship to food from the ground up, and then building peace with food.
- The first step to making peace with the foods you binge on is eating regularly, and eating enough. If you try to feel less out of control around foods when you're physically hungry, you will probably end up binging.

I really hope this gives you some insight into your relationship to food, and how binge eating is not as simple as "have more willpower." Binge eating is a really common experience, and can go on for years and even decades. You're not alone, and support is available.