



Planning for changes in eating

When people experience disordered eating, it can be helpful to plan meals in advance. Whilst on paper, a “meal plan” might look the same from a “diet”, in actual fact they are very different. A “diet” is prescriptive and rule based- and often, if the diet is for weight loss, it won’t be balanced or meet the key principles of “healthy eating”.

Meal planning is quite different. It involves following the guidelines of healthy eating and preparing meals in advance to assist adherence to these. The focus is “re-learning” healthy eating (which takes time and practice). Meal plans establish mechanical eating, which help to set up a restoration of appetite and physiological cues that are instrumental features of intuitive eating. It can also assist in setting up a more intuitive relationship with the body, from which intuitive eating may ultimately follow (albeit weeks or months later). When a person engages in mechanical eating the stomach and brain begin to communicate again.

When following a meal plan and engaging in mechanical eating, the meal plan should be adhered to regardless of satiety or urges to engage in eating disordered behaviour such as bingeing or skipping meals. A key principle to remember when returning to healthy eating is that dietary restraint or restriction is usually the problem- not the solution.

Why meal planning?

- Establishes a pattern of regular and mechanical eating
- Confines or time-limits your thoughts about food
- Prevents anxiety around meals
- It takes the mood out of food: enables you to decide what you are eating away from the emotions involved in meal times, when choice may be overwhelming
- Assists in preparations- such as ensuring you are buying the right foods in the right amounts, have healthy food available and minimises exposure to “trigger” or “binge” foods (particularly at vulnerable times)
- Meal planning helps to establish regular eating- which is clearly indicated as a solution to reduce eating disorder symptoms such as bingeing or weight loss/ fluctuations

Tips:

- Plan your menu for the week
- In planning, follow the principals of healthy eating that we have set out elsewhere
- Book in a regular time to go shopping and plan meals each week
- Don’t shop for food when you are feeling hungry or anxious as this will impact your decision making



- If it is helpful, buy foods that are portion controlled (or portion control meals immediately as this can help in adherence to meal planning). Examples might be serving and freezing portioned or using “snap lock” bags to portion snacks
- When eating off a meal plan, stick to the plan regardless. If you binge or eat more than you intended, always have the next meal or snack as planned. Similarly, if you restrict or vomit, always have the next meal as planned (the only exception here is if your medical management has advised you to “play catch ups” if you miss a meal)
- Problem solve about lapses in behaviour, rather than judge yourself harshly for these
- When introducing food challenges, increase your chance of success and mastery by starting with easier challenges at easier times of the day. Build up to the harder challenges.
- Do not eat in the gaps- delay the urge to eat or “urge surf”

What should a plan include:

- Specified amounts. This can assure you that you have not had too much or too little.
- Assigned times. We need to eat at regular intervals (every 3-4 hours). If you run late with a meal you may be vulnerable to further eating disorder behaviour, such as bingeing or restricting.
- Variety. Restriction of choice is a key feature of disordered eating. Variety is important to ensure adequate nutrition and also to prevent bingeing.

Planning for changes:

- Start with foods you feel safe with
- It is important that you find the balance between giving up rigid control of your intake and still feeling safe enough about your food so that you will not restrict/ vomit/ binge later on.
- Make changes small and achievable
- Plan for these changes! Before embarking on any change in the meal plan, ask yourself the following questions:
 - What nutritional changes do I want to make?
 - Why do I want to make these changes?
 - What steps will I take?
 - How will I know they my plan is working if?
 - How can others help?
 - What barriers might I encounter? How I will overcome these?