

## Fear Foods: What Are They and How Do We Face Them?

### Before Getting Started...

Take a few minutes to discuss the following questions with your nutritionist:

- What are three of your favorite foods? Why?
- What are three foods that you consider “off limits”? Why?
- What feelings come up when you are offered a food that is “off limits”?

### What are Fear Foods?

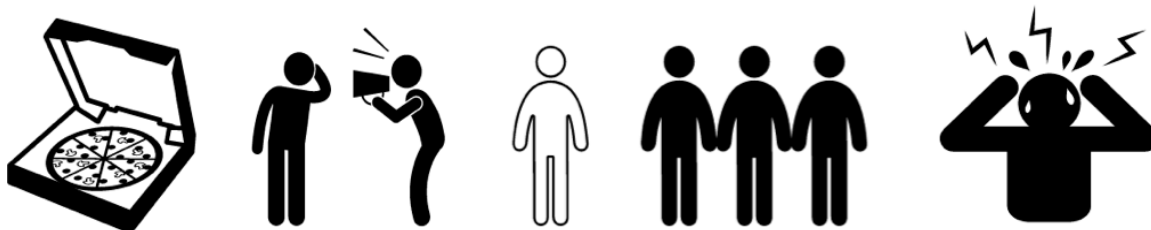
Fear foods, also called challenge foods, are foods that you may feel afraid, anxious, or uncomfortable eating. The fear of a food may come from irrational thoughts about how it impacts your body or weight or from negative memories of a food. Disordered thoughts (also called your eating disorder voice) can make you feel guilty, ashamed, or even disgusted when you do eat a fear food.

Fear foods vary from person to person, day to day, and may not even make sense to you. Media messages, diet culture, friends and family views, and past experiences with certain foods can all influence your thoughts and fears about a food.

### What’s Wrong with Avoiding Fear Foods?

In psychology, avoidance is considered an unproductive way to cope with anxiety. Avoiding a fear food may relieve your anxiety about it in the moment, but in the long-term it worsens your anxiety associated with that food. Here are some other potential consequences of avoiding fear foods long-term:

- More anxiety around food = More time and mental energy spent thinking about food
- More time spent thinking about food = Less time spent having meaningful conversations and relationships with friends and family
- Stronger eating disorder voice = Stronger “good food-bad food” mentality
- Increased appeal and desire of forbidden food = Increased risk of binge eating in future
- More difficulty recognizing your true taste preferences = Eating remains mechanical

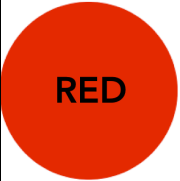




**You cannot fully recover from your eating disorder until  
you challenge your food rules and face your fear foods.**

## What Steps Can I Take To Conquer Fear Foods?

Your nutritionist and therapist will work with you to determine *when* and *how* to incorporate fear foods into your eating routine. While very few people with eating disorders feel ready to face their fear foods, challenging yourself gradually and continually is the only way to lessen your anxiety around certain foods. The steps below can help prepare you to face your fear foods:

**STEP 1: Make a list of your fear foods.** Using the traffic light signals below, list foods that are very challenging (red), somewhat challenging (yellow), and not too challenging (green).

**STEP 2: Practice challenging your inner critic.** Write down your top two fear foods from the list above. Write what your eating disorder voice may tell you about each food and then write what a healthy alternative voice could say in response.

Here's an example:

**Fear food:** Ice-cream

**Eating disorder voice:** "Ice-cream is bad. I will gain 20 pounds if I eat ice-cream"

**Healthy voice:** "There is no such thing as a 'bad food.' It's impossible to gain 20 pounds in one day."

**Fear food:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Eating disorder voice:** " \_\_\_\_\_ "

**Healthy voice:** " \_\_\_\_\_ "

**Fear food:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Eating disorder voice:** " \_\_\_\_\_ "

**Healthy voice:** " \_\_\_\_\_ "

**STEP 3: Plan ahead.** Select one fear food to work on first and create a concrete plan that outlines how you will introduce this fear food. Work with your nutritionist to brainstorm a step-by-step plan by answering the following questions:

What fear food are you planning to try? \_\_\_\_\_  
How much are you planning to have? \_\_\_\_\_  
When? \_\_\_\_\_  
Where? \_\_\_\_\_  
With whom? \_\_\_\_\_

**STEP 4: Practice healthy coping strategies that work best for you.** Your eating disorder can cause you to want to eat less or exercise more as a way to deal with the anxiety that may come up when you eat a fear food. Identifying healthy ways to cope with your anxiety and discomfort is essential to prevent you from turning to disordered eating and exercise behaviors. Your eating disorder therapist or psychologist can also help you work on this.

Circle two or three coping strategies that you feel would be most helpful to you:

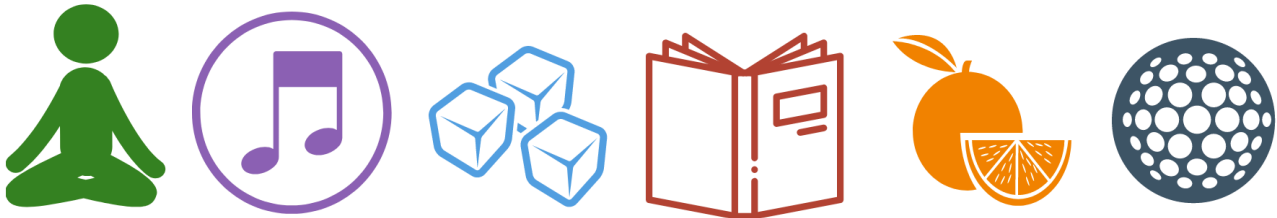
**Relaxation:** Deep breathing – Guided meditation – Progressive muscle relaxation

**Activity:** Play with a pet – Draw/color – Watch a TV show – Read a book – Listen to music

**Self soothe:** Take a warm bath – Squeeze a ball – Peel an orange – Lotion your hands

**Reframe Thoughts:** Repeat a mantra (“I can do this”) – Remind self of goal (full recovery)

**Other coping skills:** \_\_\_\_\_



**STEP 5: Seek support from others.** During times when your eating disorder voice is very loud, asking for support from others can be extremely helpful. Think of someone who has a positive relationship with food and their body who you feel would be encouraging and supportive. This person could be your therapist, nutritionist, or a close friend or family member. Be sure to have a conversation with them about how they can best support you:

- What can they do to support you when you are trying a fear food?
- What should they say or not say to help you feel more comfortable?

**STEP 6: Practice self-compassion.** Challenging your eating disorder voice is hard and facing your fear foods takes courage. Be patient with yourself, celebrate small successes, and try not to be hard on yourself if you feel like you did not face your fear food “perfectly.”

## Not Feeling Ready To Introduce Fear Foods?

If the idea of trying a fear food is too overwhelming for you right now, another approach is to start with a “safe” food and gradually adjust a safe food to transition into a more challenging food with similar characteristics.

Here are a few examples:

**“Safe” food:** Oatmeal with banana

**Fear food:** Store-bought baked good

Oatmeal with banana → Home-made banana muffin made with oats → Home-made banana muffins made with all-purpose flour → Store-bought banana muffin

**“Safe” food:** Hummus and veggies on a whole-wheat wrap

**Fear food:** Chicken Caesar salad wrap at a restaurant

Hummus and veggies on a whole-wheat wrap → Hummus and veggies on a white wrap → Hummus, veggies, and chicken on white wrap → Veggies, chicken and Caesar dressing on white wrap → Chicken Caesar salad wrap at a restaurant

**“Safe” food:** Unsweetened Vanilla Almond milk

**Fear food:** Ice-cream

Unsweetened Vanilla Almond Milk → Sweetened Vanilla Almond Milk → Vanilla Almond Milk Yogurt → Vanilla Almond Milk Ice-cream → Creamy Vanilla Ice-cream

## What Does This Mean For Me?

1. On a scale of 0 to 10, how motivated are you to introduce a fear food?
2. What is one new food that you are interested in experimenting with?
3. When, where, and how could you introduce this fear food?

## To Learn More:

Scratchfield, R. *Body Kindness* (2016) and website ([www.bodykindnessbook.com](http://www.bodykindnessbook.com))

Schaefer, J. *Goodbye Ed, Hello Me* (2009).

Lock J, Le Grange D. *Helping Your Teenager Beat an Eating Disorder* (2015).

Herrin M, Matsumoto N. *The Parent’s Guide to Eating Disorders* (2010).