

# Reconnecting with Hunger and Fullness Cues

## Before Getting Started...

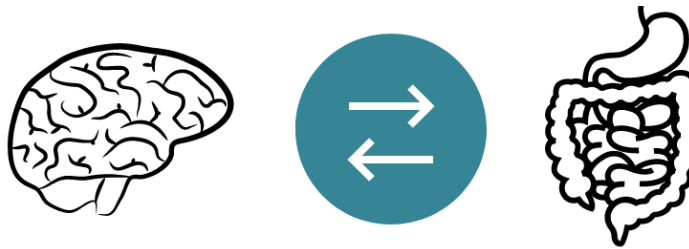
Take a few minutes to discuss the following questions with your nutritionist:

- When was the last time you remember feeling really hungry?
- When was the last time you remember feeling really full?
- What does the phrase “intuitive eating” mean to you?

## How Do Our Bodies Know When We're Hungry or Full?

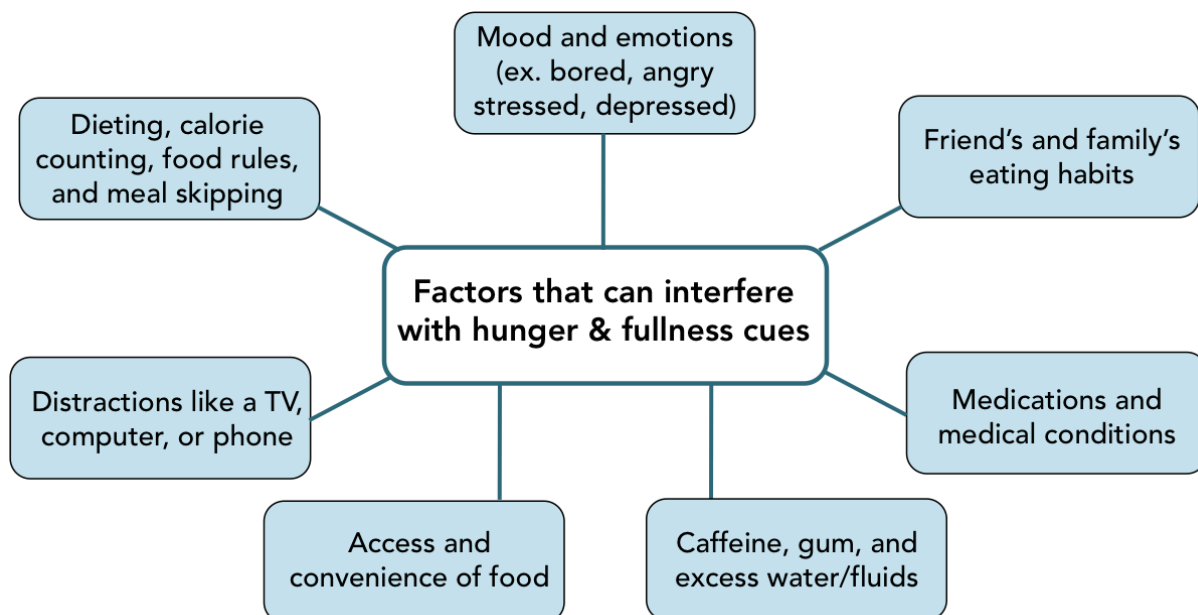
Our bodies are designed in a way so that our brain and digestive system (also called the gut) are constantly communicating back and forth:

- Your brain sends messages to your gut when your body needs energy, making you feel physically hungry: *reminding you to eat*
- Your gut sends messages back to your brain when your stomach starts to stretch after eating, making you feel full and satisfied: *signaling you to stop eating*



## Why Can It Be Hard to Recognize Hunger and Fullness Cues?

We are born with the ability to eat when we're hungry and stop when we're full by listening to our body's signals (also called intuitive eating). However, as we get older, certain circumstances can make it difficult to recognize and trust our hunger and fullness cues.



## Can I Trust My Body's Hunger and Fullness Cues?

Your nutritionist will work with you to determine if you are ready to trust your hunger and fullness cues based on your eating disorder history and treatment. Here are questions that can help to assess your readiness for intuitive eating:


- Am I underweight, malnourished, or restricting certain food groups?
- Am I overly concerned about my body size or weight?
- Do I ever feel hungry or full?

*Discuss your answers with your nutritionist to determine if you may be ready to practice intuitive eating or if a more structured eating pattern may be more beneficial for you right now.*

## How Do I Know If I'm Hungry or Full?

Everyone's body has a different way of telling them *when* they feel hungry or full and *how* hungry or full they are. The hunger and fullness scale below includes some common physical signs of hunger and fullness that you may relate to.

### **Hunger and Fullness Scale**



1. Starving	Stomach pain, nausea, no energy, weak, headache, terrible mood, could eat anything in sight
2. Overly Hungry	Stomach growling and empty, irritable, shaky, light-headed, can't stop thinking about food
3. Hungry	Stomach is rumbling, low energy, trouble concentrating, mouth watering at the thought of food, ready to eat a meal
4. Somewhat Hungry	Little grumbles in stomach, drop in energy, distracted thinking, ready to eat a snack but could wait
5. Neutral	Not full anymore, but not hungry yet
6. Somewhat Full	Stomach feels full but you don't feel satisfied
7. Comfortably Full	Full, satisfied, energized, ate enough, but not too much
8. Slightly Overfull	Slightly uncomfortable, stomach stretched, could have stopped a few bites ago
9. Uncomfortably Full	Need-to-unbutton-my-pants full, bloated, uncomfortable, sleepy, lazy
10. Physically ill	Extremely uncomfortable, nauseous, physically sick, painful

Ideally, our mind and body functions best when we stay within the 3 to 7 range and respond to our hunger and fullness cues before reaching extreme hunger or extreme fullness. When we wait too long to listen to our body's signals (1 and 2 on the scale), this can leave us feeling physically and mentally drained and can make it easy to eat past the point of fullness (8 to 10 on the scale).

## What Does Your Hunger and Fullness Scale Look Like?

Learning your own personal cues for hunger and fullness is important. Many people have been disconnected from their hunger and fullness cues for years so it can take time to fully recognize and trust your body's signals again. Start by being observant: over the next few days write down how you feel physically and emotionally when you reach the following:

**1-2:** Starving or Overly Hungry: \_\_\_\_\_

**3-4:** Hungry or Somewhat Hungry: \_\_\_\_\_

**6-7:** Somewhat Full or Comfortably Full: \_\_\_\_\_

**8-10:** Slightly Overfull to Uncomfortably Full: \_\_\_\_\_

## What Can I Learn From Using the Hunger and Fullness Scale?

The more you check in with your hunger and fullness before and after eating, the easier it becomes to listen to your hunger and fullness cues. Tracking where you fall on the scale can help you and your nutritionist evaluate your eating patterns:

**If you notice you're starving by the time you decide to eat...** it may be helpful to plan more frequent meals and snacks so you can stay better fueled.

**If you only feel somewhat full after eating...** changing the composition or size of meals to make them more filling and satisfying with a balance of food groups and nutrients may be helpful.

**If you tend to eat until you feel uncomfortably full...** it may be helpful to consider what factors may have led to overeating (ex. waiting until you were too hungry or eating in front of the TV) and practice slowing down to give you time to check in with your body's signals.



**Important Note:** It's impossible to respond to your physical hunger and fullness cues accurately 100% of the time. In fact it's healthy and natural to eat for reasons other than hunger, like in social situations, during holidays and celebrations, or when you're just really craving something. Your body is very adaptive and adjusts when you may eat more or less than your body needs. The goal of intuitive eating is to be able to recognize and respond to hunger and fullness appropriately the majority of the time.

**You cannot fail at intuitive eating because it's not about perfection; it's about learning how to listen and trust your body.**

## How Do I Know If I'm Feeling Real, Physical Hunger?

Since there are many factors that can override hunger and fullness cues, it can be helpful to ask yourself if you're experiencing emotional hunger or true physical hunger. While emotional eating can be normal and healthy, responding to physical hunger the majority of the time helps you meet your nutritional needs. Here are some ways to determine if you are feeling emotional hunger versus physical hunger.

### **EMOTIONAL HUNGER**

- Starts suddenly and urgently
- Felt in your head or thoughts
- Causes specific cravings
- Causes you to eat more than you normally would, hard to satisfy
- May make you feel guilty, regretful, or ashamed

**VS**

### **PHYSICAL HUNGER**

- Builds gradually
- Felt in your stomach
- Can be satisfied with a variety of different foods, tastes, & textures
- Can stop eating once you're full
- Makes you to feel energized and nourished

## What Does This Mean For Me?

1. What factors, if any, can make it hard for you to recognize and respond to your hunger and fullness cues?
2. How could becoming more aware of your hunger and fullness cues change the way you are currently eating?
3. What would be a social situation or special occasion where eating for reasons other than hunger would feel normal, enjoyable, and satisfying?

## To Learn More:

Tribole E, Resch E. *The Intuitive Eating Workbook: Ten Principles for Nourishing a Healthy Relationship with Food* (2017) and website ([www.intuitiveeating.org](http://www.intuitiveeating.org))

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

Ellyn Satter Eating Competence: [www.ellynsatterinstitute.org](http://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org)