

Taking the “Over” out of Overindulgence

Mindfully fill your plate and glass.
Decline the side of guilt.



Picture this: It’s a holiday or special occasion. Everyone, happy and celebrating, sits at a table laden with food, from familiar and cherished dishes to enticing new ones.

You’re excited about all the deliciousness but also a little anxious because you don’t want to overdo it. There are many less-than-healthy foods here that you know you should avoid, even though you may love them. So, you tell yourself, “I know I shouldn’t eat that, but I’ll have just a little.”

Only you have a lot, and that anxious feeling turns into indigestion with a heaping side of guilt.



You *Must* Have the Cake, but You *Can't* Eat It

That feeling of food guilt is very common. You could say that, culturally, it’s *baked in*.

On the one hand, we hold plenty as an ideal, and it’s a point of pride to provide more than enough food for friends and family. *More is always better!*

On the other hand, we’re constantly inundated with diet and thinness-obsessed messaging that emphasizes a near puritanical amount of self-restraint. *Moderation is too much!*

That contradiction is always with us. It’s especially heightened during holidays because whenever abundant food and drink are essential to a celebration, we’re under equal pressure to provide **and** not partake.

Just (Don’t) Do It

Food guilt kicks in thanks to another pernicious cultural message that tells us controlling what we do or don’t eat is a simple matter of willpower.

Common “wisdom” says: “If something isn’t good for you, just don’t eat it. Strong people can resist the temptation. Those who can’t are weak.”

Life isn't that simple, though, especially when dealing with something fundamental to survival, [like food](#). No wonder we continually set ourselves up for failure and self-recrimination at the holiday table.

Why Just Saying “No” Just Doesn't Work

No one likes to be told what to do, no matter who is doing the talking. If you say, “I can't have that slice of pie,” your inner rebel wakes up and says, “Oh yeah? Watch me.” Now, you're tempted not only to eat the pie because it's delicious but also to break a rule because it's fun. All that temptation makes you more likely to go for seconds and thirds.

Another unexpected thing happens when you tell yourself you can't or shouldn't eat something. Your mind says, “I can't eat,” but your brain hears, “There's no food!” That [mind-to-brain](#) disconnect triggers a physiological scarcity response, releasing hunger hormones into your system that drive you to eat everything in sight as if it were your last meal.

Then comes the sense of guilt over not being strong enough to conquer your cravings. How unfair is that?

Try This Instead

Now we know the two most common tactics used to decrease food intake ironically have the opposite effect. That doesn't mean you can't enjoy a holiday or special meal without overdoing it. Consider the following tips for a more effective approach.



Eat and imbibe mindfully – Observing and enjoying the experience encourages you to slow down, better appreciate flavor and texture, and makes overindulgence less likely.



Be gentle with yourself – Avoid fear or blame-based content or advice about dieting, particularly around feasts or holidays. If you overindulge,

understand that feeling guilty is natural but not required. [Mindfully process the feeling](#) and let it go to keep yourself from spiraling.



Treat holidays like a marathon, not a sprint –

Remind yourself that you'll have plenty of time to enjoy seasonal treats and beverages, so there's no need to consume everything all at once.



Think “I don't want” vs. “I can't have” – Thinking “I can't have (x)” implies you don't have control and triggers a scarcity response, while “I don't want (x), because” gives you control and triggers the [power of a motivational why](#). (I don't want to eat that extra dinner roll because I'm saving room for pie.)



Pace your alcohol intake –

The effects of alcohol tend to creep up on you, making overindulgence even easier. Intoxication can also lead to more serious physical and emotional consequences, so approach alcohol consumption with a healthy dose of respect. A good rule for men is to enjoy no more than two [standard drinks](#) per occasion, and for women, one. And, if you're driving, enjoying non-alcoholic beverages is always the best way to go.

PRO TIP

[Coaching](#) can help you achieve health and nutrition goals. For even more reinforcement, check out guided mindfulness programs from eM Life, like [Controlling Your Comfort Foods](#), [7 Days of Mindful Eating](#), and [Mindful Eating: A Path to Well-being](#).



A good strategy and the right support can help you enjoy a wealth of food and drink without shame or stomachache during holidays **and** year-round

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