

INTRODUCTION

What is Sane Eating?



Every single day, something reminds me that we're not a land of sane eaters. It might happen when I buy my morning coffee. I see the little symbols marking the "healthy" items. Then I see the massive 1,000-calorie cinnamon rolls, the pink frosted donuts, and the quart-size cups on the racks.

Or it might be at work, where one lovely person tells me she can't function if her scale registers an extra pound. The next describes the diabetic medication she's started--at age 37 she just can't lose her extra 150 lbs. She's deeply ashamed.

For more than twenty years as a clinical psychologist, I've specialized in eating disorders. While people with eating disorders struggle with harmful behaviors and emotional pain, I learned early on that just about everyone else struggles with food, too. Maybe not as intensely, maybe not always as destructively, but suffer they do.

As an eating disorders therapist, and now as a diet coach, I've uttered this mantra thousands of times. You might think of it as the "Eat Sanely" creed:

***We must find a way to eat that maintains a healthy enough weight,
without worry or guilt,
that we can more or less stick with forever,
not just for the course of a diet.***

Just about everyone who hears this agrees that it makes sense. But: how to do it? Most of us have tried countless diets and self-improvement plans. They haven't worked, haven't lasted, or have worsened the problem. Most of us, too, have therefore believed ourselves inadequate, piggish, lazy, weak, or lacking willpower.

Over the years, as I've guided the overweight, the underweight, and the in-between, I've found myself following a kind of basic pattern—though the particulars certainly vary from person to person. This course more or less follows this basic pattern. If something like the following happens, you'll plant yourself firmly on the path away from "crazy about food" and toward "eating sanely for a lifetime".

First, **Know This Problem is Overdetermined**—in other words, *it's not just you*. To really step on the path toward change, it's best to relinquish the self-blame. We live in a world where it is *extremely* hard to eat sanely. Add to that our human brain functioning, which makes it hard to stop eating what our world surrounds us with. As one writer says, "We're living in Candyland". Add to that how easy it is to seek food for comfort and anxiety reduction. Add to that possible genetic predispositions, toward conserving fat, maybe, or toward addictive or compulsive behaviors. Paradoxically, while we are suffering and blaming ourselves, it's hard to really take those first steps toward caring for ourselves well and responsibly.

2. The next point might be obvious, but in order to eat sanely, you must **Know What Kind of Eating Plan Works for You**. What's to eat? Some people really don't know this and will need trial-and-error, the guidance of a sensible book, or the help of a professional to map it out. Many others know quite well what works. The problem, they'll say, is sticking with it.
3. Yes, the sticking with it is a problem! But before you even start, it makes sense to understand the terrain ahead. No one ever quits smoking, for example, without thinking about how they'll cope with uncomfortable feelings and triggering situations. Yet, when it comes to food and eating, we tend to think, "Oh, OK, I'll just start this tomorrow." Then we beat ourselves up when we fizzle out. If you **Start With an Understanding of How You Change**, you can then set to make *real* change that lasts.
4. If "sticking with it" is the problem, it could be the diet you're trying to follow is just not right for you. Who can live on pre-packaged diet meals, after all, or really give up carbohydrates forever? But even when that's not the issue, **Obstacles Will Occur and Must be Understood and Resolved**. How could we not encounter obstacles when eating is involved? In our world, eating ties into our social lives, our emotional lives, our biology, our psychology, even our politics. Identifying, understanding, and ultimately dissolving obstacles to sane eating is where the bulk of the work—the work of change--has to occur.
5. **Movement Has to Happen**, also, if we are to maintain a healthy body weight. So it has to occur as you strive to eat sanely. Some of the same obstacles to sane eating also block this area of self-care. So some of the same means of dissolving those obstacles can help here, too.
6. Finally, resolve to **Keep it Up and Get Help Where Needed**. Some of the same factors that make it hard to eat sanely will exist forever. Obstacles that dissolve can rematerialize in times of stress. We have to learn to live with the ongoing challenges and the stresses, if we're to avoid falling off the path. And we must identify the kinds of help that can rescue us if we do fall.

So, here all together are the Eat Sanely creed and the steps to start on the path toward it:

*We must find a way to eat that maintains a healthy enough weight,
without worry or guilt,
that we can more or less stick with forever,
not just for the course of a diet.*

1. **Know This Problem is Overdetermined** (it's not just you)
2. **Start With an Understanding of How You Change**
3. **Know What Kind of Eating Plan Works for You** (what's to eat?)

4. Obstacles Will Occur and Must be Understood and Resolved

5. Movement Has to Happen

6. Keep it Up and Get Help Where Needed

The modules in this course cluster around these six basic steps. Module 1 explains why it's so hard to eat sanely. Hopefully it will help you see your own eating problems as the complex processes they really are and help motivate you to change nevertheless. Module 2 follows right up with the big question: How Much Weight Can I Lose? Module 3 discusses the act of starting, or setting out to change. How do we change? How can I start in a way that maximizes my chances of really changing for good? Next, Modules 4 and 5 help you identify the ways of eating—what and when and how—that might work best for you, and how you can solve some of the practical obstacles that might cloud your way at first.

Modules 6 through 13 offer various methods of identifying and dealing with obstacles—whether it's a way of thinking, an emotional pattern, or a family legacy that tends to push you off track in your efforts to eat sanely. You will find ways to keep track, to cope, to better tolerate the new—all in the service of developing healthier habits to stick with. It is normal and to be expected that some of these modules will help you more than others. People share many background issues in the realm of food and eating. However, what works to get one person eating sanely may not work for another. People's precise paths to change vary a great deal. There is no one diet or method or skill that will work for every single person.

Module 14 devotes itself to movement, or exercise. How does it help, how can you get yourself to do it consistently?

Modules 15 through 17 cover the later stages of change—keeping yourself on track by handling lapses wisely, avoiding relapse, getting help where needed, and setting non-food related goals for yourself. A future without food as the major focus!

If this sounds like a lot, it is. Eating sanely, for a lifetime, can transform you. If you need to lose weight or stop bingeing, you will feel encouraged and gratified in reaching those goals. They can be extremely important goals in themselves. But beyond that, know that feeding yourself well and carefully, day after day, year after year, allows for even more. Your physical health will certainly benefit. Your mood and emotional life may feel more stable. And, you'll have built a foundation of self-care and self-respect that in time can permeate all parts of life.

***NOTE:** The Eat Sanely course also offers seven “special edition” modules for particular subgroups of people. These add on to the basic course. They cover such dilemmas as losing weight and eating sanely when you're morbidly obese or recovering from an eating disorder, for example. They also address specific groups such as teens or clinicians who work with people who struggle with their eating.*