



RECOVERY FROM

BINGE  
EATING

GETTING  
STARTED

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# Hello!

How many times have you told yourself that it would just be this one last time? That you'd get the ultimate satisfaction and therefore never need to do it again? So you give yourself free reign to buy any foods you like, as much as you can get through in that day. And who cares what it all costs; financially, physically, emotionally - this is the last time you're doing it, right?

It feels good once you've made this decision, and even when you start eating the food – but the excitement fades quickly and you don't feel as satisfied as you thought you would. You go to bed telling yourself that's it, in the morning you'll feel ready to start the next part of your life, binge free. For some reason you kid yourself this time will be different.

If this is something you recognise then you really aren't alone. But fear not, there is a way out of this cycle of guilt and shame, no matter how long its been going on. And I'll be there to support you every step of the way!



## A little background info

I feel it's important to give a little information about my background so you know I really do understand how binge eating affects your life, and that no matter how long you've had this issue, it can be overcome!

I have memories of not liking my body from a very early age. I was conscious of looking different to my sisters and picked up the social cues early on that somehow there was something unacceptable about my very being. I became conscious of what I was eating and what others around me might think, so I started secret eating, sneaking in little bits of extra foods whenever I thought I wasn't being watched. The amount of food I ate in secret slowly grew over the years, as did my weight. At the same time I became more and more aware of the diet industry.

Naturally I started down the dieting route - you name it, I've had a crack at it! But alongside the increased dieting, I found the amount of food I ate when off the wagon was increasing too. Eventually this led to bulimia, which lasted a good 15 years before I was able to stop. Fantastic as it was to overcome such a destructive eating disorder, I still binge ate and the effects were still severe in terms of my physical, mental and emotional health.

Around this time I began studying Nutritional Therapy. All these years of obsessing meant I had a genuine interest!

It totally changed my focus from calories to nutrients, and understanding what the body really needs to keep it vital and healthy. The funny thing was, although my diet improved hugely, the bingeing persisted. It's just that now my "good" days were filled with genuinely nutritious foods, rather than awful diet foods.

I realised I had never made that internal decision to give up the bingeing. Yes, I'd had literally 1000s of new starts, but had I ever really decided on a very deep level that I was willing to stop? I don't think so - and I think this is where a lot of people kid themselves. They say they want to stop but there is a small, very stubborn part that isn't willing to let it go.

Looking back I believe this is because actually we do know deep down that we can stop. So it's about delaying the inevitable, because we don't want to face the period of time where we've given up something that has been such a big part of your life (and one that provides some level of enjoyment and escapism), but the rewards of having given it up seem too far down the line. This is the uncomfortable period after launching off the riverbank, but knowing there are some choppy waters ahead before reaching the other side. And the one thing we used to have to distract ourselves from the discomfort is no longer an option. So we give ourselves one last excuse to keep going another day.

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# WHAT IS Binge Eating?



## Binge Eating vs Compulsive Overeating

Whilst binge eating and compulsive overeating are technically listed as different disorders – I'm at a loss to work out what the real difference is. When you look at the definitions listed in medical forums, they both cover the following symptoms that I've listed below. These would be occurring on a regular, weekly basis for most people:

- Eating when not physically hungry
- Eating alone or in secret
- Feeling upset and/or guilty after overeating
- Feeling that you are abnormal
- Feeling “taken over” or “driven” when eating

For simplicity's sake, I'll refer to it as binge eating, but you might refer to it as compulsive overeating. Definitions aren't so important, it's about how the behaviour makes you feel and how much this can take over your life. It's also very much the mentality you engage in when you are eating large quantities of food.

## The role of dieting and restrictive eating

Why does binge eating develop in the first place? From my own story I could clearly see the dieting mentality came first. Before this, of course, is the question of self worth, but in terms of which habits create the overeating then its important to understand how restrictive eating precedes binge eating. This is key, as it then becomes clear why balance instead of dieting is essential for recovery and why the most important thing you can do will be to eat adequately.

Binge eating is often seen as just a coping mechanism and a way to avoid emotional pain (1). Whilst this is hugely important and something I go into plenty of detail about within my coaching programmes, I do think it oversimplifies things and leaves unanswered questions. Such as, why did I find myself bingeing even when happy? I used to kid myself that I could sneak a guilt-free binge in just because I was feeling so happy! And why doesn't everyone then binge as a coping mechanism? Most people love food and it would be an obvious strategy if it were simply about coping?

Of course bingeing is used to deal with life's overwhelm, but this is just part of it. Seeing it purely as a coping strategy makes it harder, as it can then feel like the only way you've been coping with life's hurdles, which isn't usually true.

So why do we binge? Ultimately, it's because we have the urge to binge and the only way we feel we can rid ourselves of this urge is to engage in binge behaviour (2). This may sound silly, but literally in the moment, why do we make that decision to binge? Those moments before hitting the sod it button. There are a whole lot of thoughts, feelings, cravings and very tangible physical sensations that drive the need to seek out large amounts of unhealthy foods. This is what I mean by the urge to binge.

And why do the urges develop? The answer is simple – habitual dieting and restrictive eating. Restricting calories triggers our brain into survival mode (3). Forbidding ourselves from eating certain foods also seems to act as a trigger for our survival centres to fire up and let loose the inner rebel.

The brain is complex, with the outer cortex involved in the high-level thinking and decision making and the inner sanctums concerned with survival. The latter is known as the primitive brain – the more simplistic, animalistic part of our brain that involves autonomic reactions and reflexes. Basically the part that isn't going to be analysing the situation and carefully weighing up the variables! It is this part of the brain that fires up when we start restricting our food, which isn't good news for making rational decisions.

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## Dopamine and the limbic system

The limbic system sits within the primitive brain and ultimately is there for 3 reasons; survival, pleasure seeking and avoiding pain (physical and emotional). It is part of our reward system, and with binge eating it's gone awry (4). The limbic system sees dieting as a threat to survival and will seek out the most obvious solution - eating large quantities of high calorie foods. A one off binge isn't a problem but repeated binges from continuous dieting cycles, leads to the reward system reinforcing itself and the brain becomes hard-wired to go down certain pathways. Put it this way, the brain of someone who has been binge eating for a while will basically light up like a Christmas tree around junk food! (5) That's why it's so difficult to resist.

Dopamine is a key neurotransmitter that stimulates our reward system. It was previously thought that dopamine was released as a result of pleasurable experiences, but it's now realised that dopamine is what causes us to want to carry out that behaviour in the first place (6). When the brain recognises the opportunity for a reward, it releases dopamine. Most people release dopamine in anticipation of a nice meal, but a binge eater releases a flood once they've made that decision to binge. For those who have binged a long time, there will actually be an increased release of dopamine when exposed to any nice foods, even if you haven't decided to binge (7). Not because you like the food more, but because your brain is giving you a bigger signal to want the food. And the sweeter the food the more dopamine is released (8) – no wonder shopping can be such a nightmare!

## Dopamine and the stress response

The urge to binge brings with it huge feelings of anxiety, that is temporarily alleviated by the release of dopamine on deciding to binge and then bingeing itself. This release of tension from the binge is only temporary though, and you then have to deal with the aftermath of feelings that follow. Unfortunately by this time the dopamine has worn off and we don't have that lovely little high that we experienced when we made the decision to binge. This is why the most satisfying part of the whole experience can be the moment you decide to cave in – you get the rush of dopamine and that's what feels so lovely. But ultimately the binge never lives up to its promises.

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## An internal dilemma!

Part of the problem, and why we often feel very divided, is because the rational part of our brain knows it's a really silly idea to go and eat a load of junk food, but the primitive part isn't able to rationalise.

We are pulled in two directions, and the primitive urges often win (10). It's maddening though, as binge eaters are often very together people in many other aspects of life, and it can be a struggle to work out why you just can't stop. Again, I'm not ignoring self-worth issues, but there is a big aspect to why we binge that can seem puzzling. Understanding the role of primal urges that hold no rationale can help with dismissing the urges to binge.

Apologies if I've given too much information in one go, but I found it a relief to have a better understanding of why binge eating occurs – it made me realise that it wasn't my lack of will power, or some kind of inherent laziness, it's just that the brain has been set up to make it so difficult for you to make those changes. But you can!

Once you make that internal decision on a very deep level, which is such a central part of this whole process, then the brain starts gearing itself towards a different goal. I will go into this in more detail in my coaching programmes, along with techniques that can be used to help the brain make these changes much more quickly and put us in a state of acceptance and peace, which is so important when overcoming any addiction.



# THE ROLE OF Nutritional Therapy



## Using nutrition to your advantage

Understanding why binge eating develops and continues is an important part of the education pillar. The other aspect to this is a deeper understanding of nutrition. Once I understood the mechanisms behind the urge to binge, I found things a lot easier. It was a relief to realise I needed to eat enough and that a long list of “forbidden” foods was counterproductive.

However, whilst it is really important to steer clear of making a forbidden foods list, there are some facts about foods that you can't ignore. Before we look at the foods that can cause problems, let's look at some basic information on what constitutes a truly healthy diet – purely from a nutrition point of view. This will become the backbone of what you eat, and that way any other foods that you include will be part of the overall balance. I've summarised the key points below.

*To ensure good health: eat lightly, breathe deeply, live moderately, cultivate cheerfulness and maintain an interest in life".*

WILLIAM LANDEN

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Studying naturopathic nutrition led to completely transforming my views about healthy eating, particularly when it comes to weight and binge eating. The two areas I found most revolutionary were around the central role that fruit and vegetables play. I understood that fruit and vegetables are part of any healthy diet, but I didn't understand enough about why they are so vital, or the quantities that make the difference between so-so health and vibrant health.

The second big shift was moving away from the idea of a low-fat diet and seeing all fats as the same - i.e. bad. Of course, if you eat too much fat, even healthy fat, this is a quick way to put on weight. Although it's good to get out of the calorie counting mode, it's ok to have an overall awareness of which foods are more calorie-dense, which is why most people can only eat a little fat before feeling full. But our bodies require fats to function properly, as the membrane around each cell is made up of a fatty layer. Fats are also the basis of many of our hormones. And you may have noticed if you've managed to stick to a low-fat diet for long enough that your skin and hair start to look pretty awful. So yes, we need some fat in our diet and it's important to get the right amount of fats from natural sources.

Understanding the importance of a really nutritious diet and how it affects our brain chemistry and blood sugar levels (making it much easier to avoid cravings and urges) helped me in many ways. I've summed up the key points below.

## Nutrition in a nutshell:

- Eat plenty of fresh fruit and veg
  - Have small amounts of healthy fats
  - Eat adequate amounts of protein
  - Include enough fruit and natural sugars in the diet
  - Don't leave too long between meals/snacks (this is important for preventing urges to binge as well as keeping blood sugar levels steady)
  - Drink a tonne of water!
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The flip side is that food can also cause problems for our brain chemistry and blood sugar levels, making it harder to avoid cravings and binge urges. Certain foods are made to be addictive. Sugar is a big factor, but sugar on its own isn't appealing – no one binges on a jar of honey! Fatty foods are also a problem – but again, who binges on butter alone.

It's the combination of sugar, fat and salt that is so lethal – along with all the chemicals additives. Diet foods are the worst for this and usually have all sorts of rubbish in them to replace the fat and sugar. These can send our brain chemistry all over the place. I used to have a lot of diet drinks, before finally giving them up. After going a few years without them, I tried a diet coke and it tasted grim and gave me a splitting headache!

So how do we fit this in with letting go of forbidden food lists? What finally worked for me was focusing on indulgent foods that were good quality and didn't contain too many additives. This made it easy to avoid the highly chemically-laden foods. I would go for good quality chocolate, crisps that weren't covered in brightly coloured powders and flavours, sourdough bread...

Having said all that, it's still important to remember there really are no foods off limit. If that means sometimes eating poor quality food, because not doing this will make you feel you're depriving yourself and may trigger a binge, then by all means have some. You'll soon find your taste for these foods reduces massively, especially as you increase the amount of whole foods and fruit and vegetables in your diet.



## What about weight loss?

I've purposefully not yet talked about weight loss, as the focus here is very much on ending the binge eating cycles. Also not all binge eaters are overweight. But I'm well aware it will be important for many, as it was for me. Wanting to get to the right weight is a perfectly natural goal, but when it comes to binge eating the weight loss is a side effect of ending the binges. This can be a little hard for some people to grasp at the start, because the dieting mentality dictates that you calorie count and under eat to lose weight. But once you cut out the huge quantities of calories consumed during a binge then that will absolutely have an effect on your weight and it will return to its natural setpoint. Have patience though as this doesn't happen overnight, especially as part of the recovery involves learning to over-indulge without bingeing.

## And the dreaded scales?

Weighing yourself can be both motivating and demotivating. It depends on the context and on each individual. Sometimes it can be good to get your starting weight and really face what it is, but you have to know that you can handle this and it won't make you feel so low you then aren't in the space to make the decision to change. I actually found it helpful to have a starting point, but please listen to your intuition on this. I then decided to weigh myself once a fortnight. I'd suggest maximum once a week, but ideally every two weeks or once a month is better. And if you'd rather ignore the scales altogether then that's totally fine! We always know when we are heading in the right direction anyway, without the need for scales.



# MASTERING Conscious Overeating

This is a really important part of long term recovery as it allows you to let go of the reins a little, or even a lot, but without giving in to a binge. Some of you might find it only happens once or twice and that's great. For others you might find this happens a lot to start with. Instead of panicking and caving in to a full scale binge realise that this was a very important learning curve and you'll find that you are then able to trust yourself to overeat without bingeing.

Let's face it, most people do overeat on occasions, its perfectly normal. There can be a fine line between overeating and bingeing, and I'm not sure I could give a technical definition of what the difference is other than you can feel it. A binge involves pressing an internal button that allows you to let go of all sense of control, because you've told yourself the restrictions will start again the next day. Whereas overeating in a conscious way still involves maintaining a certain degree of control, even though you are well aware you are eating beyond what your body needs.

As I support you through this programme it's important to let me know when this is happening, Be open about it and realise it's all part of the recovery. What you'll find is that because you know you can overeat, that it is an option, the thought of bingeing will become very unattractive. Allowing yourself to consciously overeat takes away the choice between sticking to what your body really needs from a nutritional point of view, and having a full scale binge. It feels like the middle ground, and this is exactly what is needed in that moment.



## Intuition vs Planning

Allowing ourselves to be naturally drawn to the right foods in the right balance all the time doesn't suit everyone. There is no right and wrong about this, but many people find a little planning can be helpful. Mainly, because it means you aren't having to think about food all day and this is what we are trying to get away from. However, for others, the thought of writing even a rough meal plan is literally the last thing they want to do – in which case, trust your instincts and set the pen down!

I couldn't face another planning sheet, but found it useful to think ahead about the types of meals I might cook that week. This is natural after all, and makes shopping a lot easier.

It is definitely worth stocking the fridge with plenty of healthy foods that you know you can turn into meals you enjoy.

Shopping daily for what you feel like is probably making things more challenging than they need be.

If you think a degree of forward planning would be helpful then do use the meal planning sheets provided. What I would say is don't get too far ahead of yourself. Maybe just focus on the following day, keep your plan flexible. and don't get too attached to what you have written down. Allow your intuition to make a few changes through the day if needed. For example, you might have been planning a large salad based meal for lunch but actually the weather is freezing and you feel like having something hot. Please don't stick to what you had written down just for the sake of it.



## Being around trigger foods

This might come as a surprise, but from my experience, the only way for trigger foods to no longer be trigger foods is for them not to be banned from the house at all costs! In fact, an important part of my recovery was realising I could be around these foods - in fact, I needed to be around these foods and remain in control (albeit in a loose way) in order for them to lose their power over me.

So I would suggest you buy a beautiful tin and fill it with delicious treats. Go for ones that are individually wrapped, such as Ferrero Roche or Mini Green & Blacks. Have a few things in the cupboard that would usually be seen as trigger foods, such as bags of crisps and buns. Buy quality foods and avoid the chemically-laden varieties. I stocked up on multi-packs of the Eat Real crisps and wholemeal hot cross buns (which I put in the freezer so I could take one out at a time).

This may seem like asking for trouble but if these foods remain trigger foods, even if you successfully keep away from them, it will always feel like there is potential to lose control around them. To start with it may feel like this makes things a little harder, especially on days when you might be consciously overeating, but actually having these foods around reduces the likelihood you'll feel the need to go to the shops to buy treat foods. Avoiding the supermarket when you are wanting these types of food is essential, as old habits can die hard and it's easy to find yourself picking up whole packets of things and pretty soon the binge mentality sets in. When you have these foods in the house you don't need to go to the shops, as you know you can just dip into your tin. What you'll find is that a couple of Individually wrapped sweets and a packet of crisps or slice of toast with butter will probably be enough. You've also taken away the dilemma of feeling like you have to finish up all the so called naughty foods to give yourself a clean slate for the next day.



The only way to get over the physical and psychological pull these foods have is to be around them all the time. It took a couple of months for me, and each person will be individual, but ultimately it didn't take long to get to the point where I'd even forget they were in the cupboard. This would never have happened if I had only allowed these foods in the house on special days. Frankly, it just gives them far too much reverence and importance in your life!

I wanted to be free of feeling like any food had control over me and this meant facing my fear of having those foods around me all the time. Don't be afraid that you'll binge on these foods just because they are there - if you've made that deep internal decision to never binge again then have faith in yourself that you can stick to that decision.

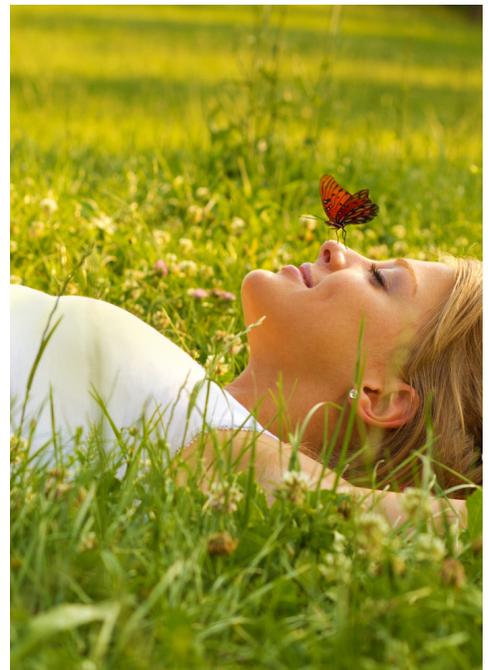
*“Whatever you fight you strengthen, and what you resist persists. To offer no resistance to life is to be in a state of grace, ease and lightness”*

ECKHART TOLLE



# TOP PRACTICAL TIPS For Success!

1. Pick a start day that doesn't involve too many commitments so you can put the focus squarely on you as far as possible. Put it in the calendar and remember that date! The day before, be very conscious that if you do binge - this is the last day of your old life.
2. Start each subsequent day with a minute or two of silence on waking, Reminding yourself of the decision you've made to leave bingeing behind. Notice any emotions that come up and allow yourself to sit with them. They are only emotions and have no power over you unless you let them.
3. Whatever you do, don't start day one with an empty fridge! Do a big shop the day before and stock up on gorgeous, healthy, fresh foods – things that inspire!. Whether you are planning ahead or not, it's important to fill your fridge with a rainbow of colours.
4. Don't stint on the exotic fruits, just remember you'll be saving yourself money when you stop bingeing so no need to just have apples and pears in there. Always have a container of ready chopped fruit salad in the fridge – I found this really helpful especially in the evening. Dates are a great option for a healthy sweet fix, so make sure to add Medjool dates to your shopping list.



*"Smile, breathe and  
go slowly"*

THICH NHAT HANH

5. Don't eat meals you don't like. This is a common mistake, especially when living on your own and doing batch cooking. I wasn't always the best cook and often found myself trying to work through a large batch of pretty awful soup! If you keep forcing yourself to finish your batch, in the end you can feel quite resentful about it – basically a precursor to saying “I deserve a treat”, which can often mean a binge in this particular circumstance. So please, please, please, find healthy meals you actually like!!! Binning the odd meal isn't the end of the world and is less wasteful than bingeing on a whole lot of junk food.

6. When we first start tuning in and using intuition to guide our choices it's important to watch out for the fact that you may find your true appetite is actually not that big and you naturally feel you don't need to eat much. There is nothing wrong with this, but don't forget the most important part of this approach is to eat enough. If you find yourself thinking “oh, I'm really not so hungry so I think I'll just skip this meal” the likelihood is this will trigger the primal centres of your brain and lead to a binge later. So whilst hunger signals are vital, if you aren't getting them reliably, don't start skipping meals, at least in the first 3-4 months.



7. Differentiate between overeating and binge eating - There is often a very thin line between the two, as I've mentioned, but it bears repeating. You may very well be overeating on all the foods you used to eat during a binge. However, there is a degree of holding back, and there is no sense of starting again the next day. With overeating there is no next day, no new start. Yes, you might decide from a balanced place that you would like refrain from overeating again the next day, but this is very different to the whole "let's start again from scratch" scenario. More about this below in "Mastering Decision Making".

*“Our greatest glory is  
not in never falling,  
but in rising every  
time we fall”*

CONFUCIUS

# Booking A Free Starter Session

If you found this guide helpful and would like to take it further, then do book a free starter session using the link below:

<https://calendly.com/oliviashakespear/starter-session>

Or alternatively, find the booking links on my website:

[www.lightworknutrition.co.uk](http://www.lightworknutrition.co.uk)



## References

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