



HEALTH

13 Experts Explain Why Diets Don't Work And What To Do Instead

These experts have two goals: to help people have better relationships with food, and to dismantle the diet-first mindset.

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we typically think of dietitians as experts who help people lose weight.

But there are registered dietitians whose approach to working with clients doesn't include dieting or weight loss at all. In fact, some of them outright reject it as a way to help their clients find satisfaction with their eating habits and their bodies. Some of these professionals call themselves weight-neutral, others anti-diet, still others practice from a [Health at Every Size \(HAES\)](#) or intuitive eating perspective, embracing principles of body acceptance and diversity and pushing back against cultural norms of thinness and diet culture.

BuzzFeed Health reached out to a bunch of these dietitians and asked them about their practice — why they took this approach, how it's worked for them, and what they've learned along the way.

Of course, at BuzzFeed Health we understand that everyone has different feelings about and goals for their health and bodies; your decision to lose weight or stop trying to lose weight is yours alone. We're all making food- and body-related decisions for a zillion reasons, from health and digestion to societal cues to what we love or hate to eat, to what we have the energy to cook or the money to buy, to what our doctors might suggest to us. Bottom line: It's your call. We're just showing you the other side of the weight loss coin.

1. "Because if dieting doesn't work for most people, why do we blame the individuals and not the approach?"

"My approach to working with clients is weight-neutral, meaning I'm concerned with their thoughts and behaviors, not the number on the scale. To people who are curious about my approach, I explain that weight does not dictate health, and there is no way of predicting what someone's healthiest weight is. Even if we could, 95–97% of purposeful weight loss attempts fail. Instead, I help my clients build sustainable habits that aren't built on restriction, and let their body settle at whatever size it's supposed to be.

After practicing as a very traditional, weight-focused dietitian for a few years, it was clear to me that weight loss approaches just do not work. I would see clients who would make all the changes, and either lose weight and gain it back, or the scale wouldn't budge at all. Many would struggle to make any changes at all. If an approach isn't achievable for a large percentage of people, why do

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2. "Dieting is black and white, all or nothing. In that paradigm, if someone is not doing 'all,' then the only option they have at their disposal is 'nothing.'"

"Dieting is a system with rules that relies upon external constructs to guide one's eating: a meal plan, a list of foods to eat and others to avoid, a points system, etc. Similarly, dieting is black and white, all or nothing. In that paradigm, if someone is not doing 'all,' then the only option they have at their disposal is 'nothing.'

[A non-diet approach involves granting oneself unconditional permission to eat.](#)

Given that frame of reference, when we propose a non-diet approach to chronic dieters, their initial reaction is some version of, 'If you are not putting me on a diet, what are we possibly going to do?' Such a reaction is understandable given their history, so we show them that another way exists.

A non-diet approach involves granting oneself unconditional permission to eat and developing an internal system based upon recognizing and honoring hunger and fullness cues, eating enjoyment, and noticing how different foods affect the body. Instead of citing a presumed lack of willpower or a supposed food 'addiction,' we ask deeper questions in a neutral fashion to explore why someone might be eating when they are not hungry or over-consuming certain foods. Our approach is flexible, we have guidelines and ideas rather than rules, and there is no wagon from which to fall."

—Jonah Soolman, RD, [Soolman Nutrition and Wellness LLC](#), Wellesley, MA

3. "I came to realize that practicing within this anti-diet paradigm was the only way to help clients truly, fully recover."

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I've found in my work that diet culture is a really sneaky shape-shifter, and at this point in history it often cloaks itself as 'wellness' when it's really about control and the hope of weight loss or physical 'perfection.'

I never recommend cutting out foods or doing elimination diets (which for most people is just another form of restriction — diet culture under the guise of health), although of course if someone has a medically diagnosed food allergy or celiac disease then I work to support them in whatever medically necessary dietary restrictions they need.

I've found in my work that diet culture is a really sneaky shape-shifter, and at this point in history it often cloaks itself as 'wellness' when it's really about control and the hope of weight loss or physical 'perfection.' As an anti-diet professional I help root out diet culture in all its sneaky forms and help people get to a place where they're truly honoring their bodies' cues and desires — NOT following external rules, whether those rules come from a formal diet plan, an Instagram 'wellness' influencer, or a 'lifestyle change that's not a diet.'"

—[Christy Harrison](#), RD, certified intuitive eating counselor, Food Psych Programs, Inc., based in Brooklyn, NY, and works with clients online worldwide

4. "I find it unethical to approach nutrition counseling with the old diet/weight loss paradigm."

"I came to employ this approach in my work as a diet tech (pre RD days!) in an eating disorder treatment center. I was exposed to the way our cultural climate of weight-obsession, food-obsession, and thin-obsession was having a negative, even deadly impact on these clients and their families.

I am interested in helping my clients promote health and build positive relationships with food, movement, and body image, without focusing on weight.

I utilize a weight-inclusive, non-diet, health-at-every-size approach when working with my

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counseling with the old diet/weight-loss paradigm. Instead, I work with clients to neutralize all foods, tune into their individual body signals of hunger and fullness, build healthy emotional coping skills, rediscover the pleasure in eating, explore ways to joyfully move one's body, and more without focusing on weight. I am interested in helping my clients promote health and build positive relationships with food, movement, and body image, without focusing on weight."

—Natalie Katz, RDN, [Feeding Your Soul Nutrition](#), Glendale, CA

5. "Weight is not the issue — whether or not the body loses weight is up to the body, not up to the client, or me, for that matter."

Food can be a comfort, a source of nourishment, and a source of joy. It's a part of life, just like movement.

"When I work with clients, I employ a weight-inclusive, intuitive movement, all-foods-fit approach. By 'all foods fit,' I mean that all foods can fit into an eating pattern that works for that particular person. Together, we explore what foods the client actually likes (not what they think they 'should' like; as in, do you actually like the taste of this food?), what sits well with them from a digestive viewpoint (how's the energy level? Any GI disturbance?), and what 'feeds their soul' (can we take time out to eat? Are we able to take time to cook a meal? Can we slow down surrounding food and connect with others?).

Weight inclusivity embraces all sizes without judgment. I don't use the term 'weight neutral' as it ignores the fact that, in our current society, there is weight stigma. That's a fact. There's nothing 'neutral' about it. It's one of the issues that needs to be discussed in session, especially with clients in larger bodies, as they often come to me on a quest to lose weight to fit into our weight normative societal paradigm. I don't blame them — as humans, it's so important to 'fit in' (so interesting, that terminology...) and to do that, our society requires that we be a certain size and at a certain level of health. I work with clients to dismantle that for themselves and to become aware of behaviors that are no longer working for them. Weight is not the issue — whether or not the body loses weight is up to the body, not up to the client or me, for that matter. Food can be a comfort, a source of nourishment, and a source of joy. It's a part of life, just like movement. Movement is about an appreciation of what your particular body can do."

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and promotes unhealthy attitudes toward body image and self worth."

"In the first three years practicing as a dietitian, I encouraged people (adults, teens, and children) to go on diets believing it would help them be healthier and live longer. During this time I also noticed people of size were treated differently and blamed for their health conditions. As I was mentally taking this in, I realized how incongruent my life was with what I taught clients: I didn't diet nor had I ever. I didn't think there were good or bad foods. I had enjoyed connecting with hunger, fullness, and satiety because of my thin privilege.

[I don't use the scale as a measure of progress because for most people it keeps the focus off health and promotes unhealthy attitudes toward body image and self worth.](#)

Now my nutrition therapy is rooted in evidence-based science as well as almost 20 years of clinical observation. I help people move toward health using only weight inclusive and non-diet theories and interventions. That means I don't use the scale as a measure of progress because for most people it keeps the focus *off* health and promotes unhealthy attitudes toward body image and self-worth."

—Julie Duffy Dillon RD, owner, [Julie Dillon Consulting](#) + [BirdHouse Nutrition Therapy](#), Greensboro, NC

7. "Our culture essentially defines health by size and appearance. So we have to rewrite all of that and think of it as much more multifaceted."

"First and foremost I think of myself as someone who partners with my clients to help them heal their relationship with food and body. The principles that inform my counseling style include Health at Every Size and Intuitive Eating and is centered on the belief that we cannot control our bodies and trying to do so is harmful and ultimately damaging to one's health.

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Some of the things I do and don't do in my practice: I provide education on the harmful effects of counting calories, points, macros, weight, steps, etc., and help them move away from quantifying health. In the beginning I have to debunk incorrect nutrition information and provide them with a model of eating that is adequate and balanced. I also help them redefine what 'health' is. Our culture essentially defines health by size and appearance. So we have to rewrite all of that and think of it as much more multifaceted.

This approach, while a lot of work and requires a lot of bravery, is ultimately empowering and freeing. Just today a client told me that she could not believe the growth she has experienced over the past year. She stated that while life is hard and hectic and stressful, internally she feels happier and more at ease than she has ever felt in her whole life."

—[Marci Evans](#), RDN, Food & Body Image Healer, Cambridge, MA

8. "I just refuse to put clients through that harmful cycle any longer now that we know there are better options out there."

"Weight loss is highly predictive of weight gain, and a typical cycle of dieting shows initial short-term weight loss, followed by weight regain, followed by emotional distress of guilt and shame, followed by another diet. This isn't news to anyone, but traditional models of dieting ignore this evidence and continue to focus on weight loss anyway. I just refuse to put clients through that harmful cycle any longer now that we know there are better options out there.

[Intuitive Eating counseling is much, much more than just stopping dieting and having permission to eat all foods. That just scrapes the surface.](#)

After working with hundreds of clients doing traditional weight-focused meal planning and calorie counting approaches I continued to see the vast majority of people either drop out of programs or adopt the 'on again, off again' diet cycle so I decided there must be a better way. I was seeing lots of clients who reported binge eating while dieting which is a very common development from dieting. Intuitive Eating counseling is much, much more than just stopping dieting and having permission to eat all foods. That just scrapes the surface. I work with clients to help them get to know their body's hunger and fullness cues, and they learn through practice and repetition to check in with their body on questions like: What do I really want to eat? How will

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—[Sumner Brooks](#), RDN, based in Portland, Oregon, and works with clients virtually across the US

9. "This industry's survival depends on you coming back for more, again and again and again."

"After several years working in the dominant weight paradigm, I became disillusioned and started to feel like I was causing more harm than good. We were all aware that dieting didn't work, and we really thought we were helping people make healthy lifestyle changes. So I started to feel unethical, and wondered why we were focusing on weight. There was plenty of data to show that lifestyle changes can improve health regardless of weight change, and I thought we could trust people's bodies to sort out the weight.

[We want people to know they are not broken and that failed attempts at weight loss are not your fault.](#)

After 12 years of deep listening and learning while facilitating groups, workshops and retreats for women struggling with body shame and disordered eating, we settled on the phrase '[Body Trust](#)' to describe our approach to healing.

We want people to know they are not broken and that failed attempts at weight loss are not your fault. The diet and cosmetic fitness industry has a 95% failure rate, and thrives when customers blame themselves instead of their flawed approaches. This industry's survival depends on you coming back for more, again and again and again."

—Dana Sturtevant, RD, cofounder, [Be Nourished](#), Portland, Oregon

10. "Body acceptance doesn't come naturally in this environment, so we focus a lot on ways to do this, like exposure to positive images of fat bodies, self-talk to halt negative body thoughts, and techniques to distract

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—this information spectacularly. I decided I never wanted to go hungry again, or continue to feel bad about my body, and that I would never emphasize weight loss for anyone in my future career as a dietitian.

Weight stigma is such a huge problem, and acknowledging that it's completely normal to want to lose weight in a fatphobic world is so important.

I use HAES-compatible, non-diet eating models such as Intuitive Eating and Eating Competence to help clients normalize their relationships to food. I often start with asking them to give themselves unconditional permission to eat any and all food, as much as they want. This is an important first step, because guilt and mental restriction (e.g. labeling foods as 'bad') can drive binge-type behaviors, or can further their restrictive tendencies. Hunger and fullness awareness is also a big part of this work, as is frequent exposure to their forbidden foods in a safe way. When they are able to put weight outcomes to the side, they make much better progress in becoming internally regulated eaters.

But equally important is understanding why someone might want to lose weight — weight stigma is such a huge problem, and acknowledging that it's completely normal to want to lose weight in a fatphobic world is so important. Body acceptance doesn't come naturally in this environment, so we focus a lot on ways to do this, like exposure to positive images of fat bodies, self-talk to halt negative body thoughts, and techniques to distract from constant body obsession."

—Glenys Oyston, RD, [Dare to Not Diet](#), Los Angeles, CA

11. "By taking the focus away from weight, my clients find that they can finally make peace with food and have a better understanding and appreciation for their bodies."

"After years of focusing on weight loss, I've realized that it is much more helpful to take a weight-neutral approach in my nutrition counseling. I try to help clients focus on which habits they have adopted that are healthy, and which habits are getting in the way of their health goals. By taking

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When I start to talk to my clients about some of these principles, many of them become tearful because this is the first time they are hearing that their weight is not a sum of their health or self worth.

I realized that focusing on weight was resulting in way too much anxiety for my clients. Often times, they wouldn't be able to reach their 'goal weight' without deprivation and disordered eating. If the scale went up, people would leave my office feeling bad about themselves and often revert back to some of their original not-so-healthy habits. I try to use an intuitive eating approach and help clients learn how to focus on their internal wisdom about what to eat, how much, and when. When I start to talk to my clients about some of these principles, many of them become tearful because this is the first time they are hearing that their weight is not a sum of their health or self worth. They are also more motivated to make healthy habit changes because the pressure of reaching or maintaining a certain weight is off the table."

Jessica Jones, RD, cofounder of [Food Heaven Made Easy](#) and cohost of the [Food Heaven Podcast](#)

12. "You don't have to reach this 'ideal body weight' to live your best, healthiest life."

"My approach to nutrition involves helping people develop a healthy relationship to food. What does that even mean though? Well, I promote eating foods that have high nutritional value, help in fighting off chronic disease, and promote good health (insert 'plant-based foods' here). I also think there's a place for the not-so-healthy stuff, if they bring you satisfaction and pleasure (insert 'glazed doughnuts and onion rings' here). My approach doesn't involve restriction, and focuses more so on the wide range of plant-based foods you *can* eat.

Also, when it comes to weight, it's not the focus of the conversation. Eat nourishing foods, maintain an active lifestyle, and live your best life. Your weight will settle where it settles, and that may not be at your calculated 'ideal body weight.' And guess what? That's okay. You don't have to reach this ideal body weight to live your best, healthiest life."

—Wendy Lopez, RD, cofounder of [Food Heaven Made Easy](#) and cohost of the [Food Heaven Podcast](#), Bronx, New York

13. "I think it is important to talk about and understand the stigma associated around weight."

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Nutritionally, foods are different for sure, but emotionally, can we treat all foods as equal and not label them good or bad.

First of all, my goal is to help the client tune out the nutrition noise that is going on in their head and begin to tune into their body cues, like hunger and fullness. Secondly, I encourage clients to make food emotionally equal. That means, nutritionally, foods are different for sure, but emotionally, can we treat all foods as equal and not label them good or bad. Next, by the client learning to trust their body, they begin to realize that they have a lot of wisdom about how foods physically make them feel. Lastly, I think it is important to talk about and understand the stigma associated around weight. This allows people to really connect to the societal pressure that we all feel around our body size and how that disconnects us from our internal body wisdom. Basically, I encourage my clients to approach their food and bodies with compassion, curiosity, and empathy. I've seen how doing this, clients are transforming how they approach food and beginning to develop body trust."

—[Aaron Flores](#), RD, California-based nutritionist specializing in intuitive eating and [Healthy at Every Size \(HAES\)](#), cohost of *Dietitians Unplugged*

Responses have been edited for length.

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