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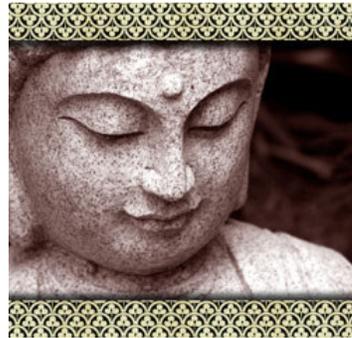
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## Relax Your Way to a Healthy Weight

By Annie Kay MS, RD, RYT



### **My body and I have had a turbulent relationship.**

Some of my earliest memories are of racing through the fragrant pine forest behind my house, crawling through the underbrush to scout the best site for the girls' tree fort. We played tomboy games of escape in the summer twilight. I reveled in movement. I enjoyed my body with the enthusiasm of discovery and the pride of ownership. But somewhere along the line that early joy was squelched. A dissonance grew between what I saw as the realities of my female physical body, the changing emotional needs of my heart, and the thoughts and beliefs of my teenage mind.

I was in an early wave of the generation that Mary Pipher, PhD, describes so well in her book *Reviving Ophelia*. Girls who experienced a disconnect from themselves as they came of age. As I grew through adolescence I lost track of those things I loved, including my passions for physicality, art and nature. I focused instead on being what others (my classmates, boys, and the evermore ubiquitous media) seemed to want and expect me to be. I grew up in the '60s and '70s watching media images of beauty grow super thin, culminating in Twiggy and heroin chic. Oh, the titillating shock of extreme thinness! And I liked it. And I could do it. Almost. The only problem was that a full social life required eating, and lots of it. So many thin girls seemed to be able to eat cheeseburgers, fries, Cokes, and never gain weight. It just didn't add up.

I remember my freshman biology teacher introducing the idea of women who vomited after gorging on junk food. The women who did this were presented as selfish, crazy, and bad Christians, but a seed was sewn in my mind. Though it was "bad," here was an easy solution to an impossible problem. So I began to experiment. And it worked. At first, purging was an occasional way to deal with high-calorie social situations. But it kept expanding. It made me feel more in control, even though a world of deceit and secrecy was wrapped around it and I often felt physically lousy because of it. It became a larger and larger part of my life. By the time I was a sophomore in high school, I had a full-blown eating disorder. While I eventually got the guidance and support I needed to end the destructive cycle, disordered eating and its emotional paradigm haunt me to this day. Certainly the consumer culture and media obsession with super-thinness haven't changed. The unhealthy trends that promote eating more and faster and doing more in less time haven't changed. But who I am and how I care for myself have.

My passion for food and the body was fed as I studied nutrition at Cornell and Boston University, cooking my way through school in restaurants as varied as the health food co-op to the five-star white linen bistro. I reveled in the sensuality of the dining experience. And I struggled with weight and eating. I wrote about food. I developed healthy and delicious recipes for books and websites. And I struggled with weight and eating. I worked as a clinician, encountering people who suffer the chronic health consequences of lifetimes of overabundance, or the deprivation of body-wasting diseases. And I struggled with weight and eating.

Through my work I noticed that even those whose lives depend upon making dietary changes often cannot do it. Living a healthy lifestyle is much more than knowing what to eat. By the time most of us hit 40, our dietary patterns and our bodies reflect years of emotional and physical life. I have counseled women trapped in a diet-binge cycle. They have come to me with a hatred for their bodies that set the stage for compulsive eating and unhappy lives. I know others who have starved themselves for years and are fashionably thin but have malnourished bodies and sad, deprived spirits. I know many men and women who have struck a dynamic balance between enjoying food and maintaining their weight; each of them has written their own equation for how that balance works. How and what we eat reflect how we feel about ourselves on the deepest of levels. And eating is one of life's greatest sensual experiences. But finding and keeping the balance of eating well, sustaining health through times of stress, and enjoying food without compulsion is, for many, one of modern life's great struggles. And it simply doesn't have to be.

### **Training Your Mind To Adjust Your Weight**

Did you ever think that simply relaxing in meditation or having a gentle yoga practice could help you find peace in the war on weight? Scientists and yoga practitioners are finding it so. Yoga is multi-tasker. It provides stress management, moderate physical activity, and its philosophical framework gives us a much-needed guide to a moderate lifestyle.

Yoga originated in India, and can be traced as far back as 5,000 BC. The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit (an ancient language) root word yuj, which means to bind, join, and concentrate one's attention. It also means unions or communion. While yoga in America today is often only thought of as the physical practice (asana), the full practice of yoga encompasses all aspects of your life including your mental attitude, lifestyle choices, how you spend your time and energy, and philosophical study and ritual. The essence of asana practice is simultaneous conscious physical movement, attunement to breath, and observation of sensation. So, your mind and body re-learn how to work together.

Meditation is one aspect of yoga, and is a process of quieting the physical body and the mind. Yoga scholar Georg Feuerstein, PhD, describes meditative absorption (dhyana) as the state of deep concentration in which an internalized object fills the entire space of consciousness. An example might be to focus on your breath, observing its rhythm, temperature, and the sensations you feel as you watch its journey into and out of your body. There is no loss of lucidity, but your sense of wakefulness may intensify even as your awareness of your external environment fades.

A steady yoga practice can help you to clarify internal (what you feel in your heart) vs. external (consumer-media generated) values. It can help you to develop the skills to differentiate between reality (that you are a divine being) and delusion (that there's something deeply wrong with you that can be corrected by achieving cultural norms of beauty). And it gives you a physical context for emotional work. All told, it provides useful tools for the challenging personal transitions around eating, self-care and weight. As you develop your practice and become more familiar with your internal cues, you may become less influenced by the external values of beauty and excessive thinness projected in the media. You'll be inoculated!

Many national health organizations feature moderation in their guidelines, but are light on the how-to's of achieving a moderate lifestyle in our anything-but-moderate culture. In yoga philosophy moderation is not a passive state, but is more akin to "standing in the fire" between the two beckoning poles of excess and deprivation. The moderate yogini is no passive risk-avoider, but is a highly skilled and strong-willed warrior. The practice of yoga and meditation may assist the development of mindfulness during mealtimes, aiding awareness of portion sizes, food preparation, and eating speed.

Yoga is a vehicle for training your mind to think clearly, calmly, and kindly. That journey of exploring your mind's ways occurs within your physical body. Learning to hear and interpret your body's messages can help you recognize and discern the physical sensations of emotion, stress, and disease. This ability to reconnect to sensation is in essence the mind-body connection. It can profoundly change your life.

And it's the reason why coupling nutrition with yoga is an excellent way to adopt a healthier lifestyle. Yoga and meditation may not be useful in all situations of weight management. You must freely commit to regular practice — even if it's just 5 or 10 minutes each day to receive the benefits. If this sounds like a good fit for you, however, these practices can offer a mental paradigm shift and the gentle physical activity that may uniquely support healthy attitudes about weight, eating, and self-care.

### Conscious Eating Meditation



**Make a conscious decision early in the day to prepare and eat one meal or snack as a meditation.** Decide what it will be and when you'll do it. Give yourself a half hour for a snack, and more for a meal.

**Prepare your food by hand, preferably without machines, in silence.** Simple preparations are great, such as peeling an orange or making a simple salad or sandwich. What can you make that honors and nourishes your body? As you prepare your food, take your time, breathe, and move slowly. Appreciate each ingredient with all five senses. What is its color and texture? How does it smell? Does it have a sound? Vibration? Honor the food and yourself with slow and caring preparations.

**Once prepared, sit down with your food in front of you.** Place both feet on the floor and consciously connect with the ground. Bring the palms of your hands to hover over your food, and notice what you feel. With your palms here, give thanks for the food, the experience, and anything else you are grateful for.

**Begin to eat. Again, appreciate the food with all five senses.** Chew slowly and completely — can you chew each mouthful 30 or 50 or even 100 times? Explore the full flavor and the variety of tastes that make up this food. Feel the texture, note the smell, and listen to the sound of each bite you take. Place your eating utensils back on the table between each bite of food. Breathe and relax. Once you complete your meal or snack in this way, pause. This may be a good time to note your reflections in your journal.

— (From *Every Bite is Divine: The balanced approach to enjoying eating, feeling healthy and happy, and getting to a weight that's natural for you*)

**Annie B. Kay** is a dietitian, yoga therapist and author of *Every Bite Is Divine: The balanced approach to enjoying eating, feeling healthy and happy, and getting to a weight that's natural for you*. She lives with her surfer husband and crazy cat on the islands of Nantucket, MA and Kauai, HI. Find out more about her writing and work at <http://www.anniebkay.com>.

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