

Nutrition model stresses positive experience of eating

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Enjoying the eating process without focus on dietary restrictions may be key to managing weight and staying healthy, according to researchers who have unveiled a new and effective model for managing eating.

The Satter Eating Competence Model, also known as ecSatter, was created by Ellyn Satter, a registered dietitian, family therapist and author of “Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family,” Kelcy Press.

Competent eaters are positive, flexible and comfortable with their eating habits and make it a priority to regularly provide themselves with enjoyable and nourishing food. They guide food intake based on the internal processes of hunger, appetite and satisfaction, and rely on the body’s innate ability to maintain a preferred and stable weight.

Satter observes that the eating competence model cultivates effective eating attitudes and behavior by emphasizing permission and discipline:

--The permission to choose food you enjoy and eat it in amounts you find satisfying.

--The discipline to provide yourself with regular and reliable meals and snacks and to pay attention when you eat them.

Being eating competent appears to mirror overall-well being, notes Satter of Madison, Wis. People with high eating competence feel more effective, are more self-aware and are more trusting and comfortable

both with themselves and with other people.

Barbara Lohse, associate professor of nutritional sciences at Penn State, directed the research on ecSatter. Dr. Lohse underscores the model's attention to psychological and biological needs.

"Many of us have eating problems, because as children, we are forced into eating more or less food than we need. That is traumatic. Eating becomes a mindless activity invested with conflict and anxiety, and not something to be enjoyed. To overcome those feelings, you have to ignore how you feel about eating, just eat," said Lohse.

Research by Lohse and her Penn State colleagues suggests that people with high eating competence do better nutritionally, have healthier body weights, higher levels of good cholesterol and fewer of the components of "sticky plaque," today's high-tech approach to predicting the tendency to cardiovascular disease.

The Penn State researcher says ecSatter represents a fundamental shift from the conventional approach to eating management. "If it was successful to have people be uncomfortable and restrictive with what they eat, just going by the rules for the nutrients and calories they need, we would not have an obesity problem," said Lohse, whose findings appear this month (September/October) in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior.

"We need a different mindset: Weight is not the big issue, but rather being comfortable with how you eat," she added.

According to Satter and Lohse, there are four steps to competent eating:

--Take time to eat, and provide yourself with rewarding meals and snacks at regular and reliable times.

--Cultivate positive attitudes about eating and about food. Emphasize providing rather than depriving; seeking food rather than avoiding it.

--Enjoy your eating, eat things you like, and let yourself be comfortable with and relaxed about what you eat. Enjoying eating supports the natural inclination to seek variety, the keystone of healthful food selection.

--Pay attention to sensations of hunger and fullness to determine how much to eat. Go to the table hungry, eat until you feel satisfied, and then stop, knowing another meal or snack is coming soon when you can do it again.

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