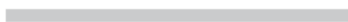


WHAT IS EAT TO LOVE?



— AT TO LOVE won't help you lose weight. You will not find suggestions for slimming down, toning up, eating clean, or being your best self. This book will not tell you how to detox, cleanse, go gluten-free, or cut out sugar or carbs.

Still reading?

Then you might want to know that, while it won't help you lose weight, Eat to Love will help you lose the destructive and unfounded belief that you will only be happy, healthy, and confident if you achieve a certain weight. It will help you drop your shame, confusion, anxiety, and paranoia about food, eating, and living in the body you have right now. It will help you shed the suffering created by the diet culture's magical eating and free your mind and body from its stranglehold.

“Eat to love” is an expression my mom used. Usually it was when recounting a dinner she cooked for someone and how they “threw their ears back and ate to love.” To me, this meant eating with a sense of unselfconscious joy. It also implied an emotional connection with the food, whether it was a favorite childhood dish or something associated with cherished memories. The way my Uncle Rob ate corned beef and cabbage or my Aunt Min dove into a bowl of *spaghetti con*

*aglio e olio*. I named my non-diet nutrition therapy practice Eat to Love with the hope that I could help women rediscover the joy inherent in eating and in being in their bodies. It was only later that I realized Eat to Love had a deeper meaning.

For many of us, eating has become fraught with worry and fear. We often eat what we think we *should* and not what we *want*. We think wanting, in and of itself, is dangerous and wrong. Or we don't know what we want anymore because, as Caroline Knapp writes in her book *Appetites*, our desires have become "submerged and rerouted." The deeper meaning of Eat to Love, therefore, is to eat as a form of self-love and care. To choose foods that give us pleasure and that feel good in our bodies. To treat ourselves overall as if we deserve happiness and pleasure just as we are.

Eat to Love also means feeling comfortable inhabiting the bodies we have right now. Everything we experience between the moment we are born and the moment we die happens in our bodies. From performing bodily functions to experiencing divine ecstasy, our bodies are there with us constantly as a vehicle and as a witness. Our bodies are intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. They move through a world that imposes ideals and values based on these intersections, and so no body is ever the same or ever has the same experience. In our bodies, we experience pleasure and pain, strength and weakness, illness and recovery. In our bodies, we experience existential questions, deepest meaning, and spiritual awakening. Our bodies define us as separate individuals and connect us with others. Yet bodily pursuits, such as those pertaining to wellness, usually leave out our spiritual side, while spiritual pursuits, such as understanding the meaning of our lives, fail to include the body. Eat to Love recognizes that body and spirit cannot exist without each other.

This book is a call to action and a call to sanity. It brings your physical body together with your spiritual self in order to mend the separation that has alienated you from your own intelligence, pleasure, and satisfaction. It is an approach to food and body that cracks you open and connects you with what you were born knowing, as well as with the deeper values that were neglected while you counted calories,

chained yourself to the scale, and watched your world, but probably not your body, get smaller and smaller. On the Eat to Love path, you are likely to find yourself thinking and being in the world differently, in part by asking how you might live your life if bodies of all different sizes, shapes, colors, ages, and levels of ability were celebrated.

Eat to Love works on two levels. The first brings a sense of attention, gentleness, and sanity to how you relate to food and your own body through the inward examination and understanding of your thoughts and feelings. The second gradually explores ways to turn that gentleness and sanity outward through the actions you take, the behaviors that define your life, and how you relate to other people, situations, and your environment. As you learn to relate to yourself and to others with kindness rather than aggression, you gradually make the world more sane and enlightened. Continually coming back to consult your heart with curiosity allows you to see beyond the narrow programming of the diet culture. The more curious you become about yourself, the more curious you become about others. The more you understand yourself, the more you understand others. And the more you love yourself, the more you love others.

By reading this book, doing the contemplations, and learning to treat yourself with gentleness, you are changing not only your own life but also the lives of those around you. Modeling compassion and attunement is a radical act in this weight-obsessed, fat-phobic, magical eating culture. Trusting your body and going beyond this insanity encourages others to take notice, perhaps planting a seed that will ripen in the future, allowing them to begin their own path. This slow outward branching increases the compassion quotient of the world we live in.

## How It Works

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In this book, you will learn why much of what you think you *know* about dieting, fat, and health is wrong. You will see how many of the eating and exercise thoughts and behaviors considered normal in

our culture are actually harmful and disordered, marked by anxiety, obsession, and fear. I will identify for you why fat is not the problem, diets are not the solution, and our pursuit of the perfect diet or body has shoved us further away from the safety we sought toward greater pain and chaos. Finally, you will find out why seeing your body as a problem to be fixed will always lead to confusion and suffering.

Next, you will explore what it means to Eat to Love in your own life: to feed your body in a way that permits you to live (and love) your life and to connect more authentically with your world. The foundation of Eat to Love is a breath-awareness meditation practice called shamatha, also known as the practice of tranquility. Meditation, or choosing to place your attention on an object such as the breath, is inherently a process of feeling, being with, and allowing things to be as they are. In practicing meditation, we allow ourselves to be as we are. We tame our minds and open our hearts in a way that allows us to make friends with ourselves without changing ourselves. Though it might seem that the way to do this is to cast out the things we think are bad and accentuate what we consider good, that type of friendship is superficial and conditional. By practicing meditation and being with things as they are, we see ourselves honestly, without diminishing or aggrandizing anything. As a result, we develop the capacity for unconditional friendship with ourselves.

Upon the foundation of a meditation practice, Eat to Love applies a set of Buddhist teachings called the Six Paramitas, or transcendent perfections: generosity, discipline, patience, exertion, meditation, and wisdom. The Six Paramitas guide us to eat peacefully, wisely, and sustainably. If you are new to Buddhist philosophy and meditation, be assured that these concepts will be introduced in a basic sense before I address them in the context of food, body, and caring for yourself. If you have an established meditation practice and are already familiar with the Six Paramitas, know that this book will be looking at them in ways that are likely to expand your own understanding and application of them.

The Six Paramitas guide you to rely on your body's internal wisdom rather than on external forces such as diets and "experts." When

you Eat to Love, you make choices primarily based on physical sensations, such as hunger, fullness, and what feels good in your body. You eat with absolute permission, pleasure, and joy. And, as a result, you are present, precise, and flexible.

Throughout the book, I offer suggested contemplations that will help you bring the power of these teachings and practices into day-to-day life. By doing them, you will develop a new language with which to describe your relationship with food and body—a language that goes beyond the narrow orthodoxy that forms bonds between dieters or clean eaters, reaching deeper to articulate previously unexplored fears, aspirations, and realizations. This new means of conveying your thoughts and experiences will help you make sense of your own journey and share it with others.

To go even deeper, download the at-home program (available at <https://eatzlove.com/eat-to-love-at-home-program>) to transform contemplations into actions. Every day of your life for the rest of your life. During the first week of the program, you will focus on one paramita per day in order to begin a sustainable meditation practice. After that, you will have the option of continuing more intensely by focusing on each paramita for a full week. As the weeks progress, you will gradually increase your meditation practice and investigate your thoughts, beliefs, behaviors, and challenges along your personal Eat to Love path.

## What to Expect

Though everyone's Eat to Love path will be unique, certain stages are more likely to occur earlier, while others come with time.

The first stage of learning to Eat to Love is recognizing how much the diet culture's magical eating promises have misled you, how dieting causes long-term weight gain, how our cultural programming makes us fear fat, and how many of us have sought security somewhere it could never be found. Part of this new insight includes how much magical eating has cost you personally. Totaling the time, money, effort, and experiences lost unsuccessfully trying to change

your body is a jarring but necessary precursor to shifting your allegiance away from false idols and toward your own intelligence.

At this point, you will begin to reclaim control over how you eat and inhabit your body. Taking back this power involves removing externally or self-imposed deprivation, and eating with a sense of absolute permission, so that you discover what truly satisfies you. Appetite drives what you eat while internal sensations of physical hunger and fullness drive when and how much. By eating consistently throughout the day and nourishing your body in ways you find uniquely satisfying, you will invite and become familiar with the sensations you previously ignored or overrode.

With awareness of physical hunger comes awareness of its absence. When the desire to eat begins to arise in the absence of physical hunger, Eat to Love will guide you in choosing whether to eat or to meet your emotional needs without food, though the choice is always yours, judgment-free. By elucidating your habitual misuses of food, you will recognize patterns, reveal deeper emotions and needs, and determine how to attend to them with precision and gentleness.

Later stages on the Eat to Love path are likely to include recognizing and responding to the feeling of fullness or the sensation of *enough*, bringing joyful and embodied movement back into your life, and accepting your body as it is. Recognizing and responding to fullness is notoriously more complicated than hunger for many people. As a dieter, you subsisted on as few calories as possible, so that when you were dieting, less was more, and when you gave up on a diet, more was more. Dieting also taught you to defer to serving sizes, measuring cups, and mental tallies to dictate how much you ate rather than trusting your own physical sensation of fullness. By continuing to work with absolute permission to eat, you are allowing yourself to gradually understand what enough feels like in your body: to eat as much as you really want and need, knowing that this may change from one day to the next.

Diet culture conveyed that exercise should be a means to an end, that end being weight loss, weight maintenance, or improved fitness.

Though there is nothing wrong with exercising for health reasons, the entanglement between physical activity, weight loss, and fitness has robbed us of simple pleasures like sports, dance, and play. Moving our bodies is an inherently joyful expression of ourselves. When we bring embodied movement back into our lives, we fully inhabit our bodies and connect with ourselves and with others. Whether in how we walk, salsa, sit on our meditation cushion, or make love, it is only with the realization that our bodies are completely acceptable, lovable, and good as they are that we can delight in moving them in ways that give us the most happiness.

The penultimate stage of the Eat to Love path is accepting your body as it is right now. Acceptance could be mistaken for resignation, but nothing is further from the truth. The diet culture confused us into thinking that hating (or at least distrusting) our bodies would motivate us to change them. The truth is that such harshness beats us down and makes us feel worse, either because we drive ourselves harder or stop caring completely. Put simply, we take care of things when we love them, our bodies included. Instead of feeling as if we are surrendering the battle with our bodies to accept them as they are, we can reframe it so that we choose not to fight. Instead of waging warfare, on the Eat to Love path we aim to listen to our bodies. We vow to come back to them again and again to figure out what they are telling us. By remaining open to what our bodies are communicating, we begin the process of acceptance. Acceptance might look differently from what you expect. It does not mean never having another negative thought or feeling about your body. Rather it means committing to being with your body as it is and listening and responding to its changing needs to the best of your ability. There is no easy or quick way to do this, and this part of the process, above all others, happens at its own pace. But the rewards are deep and enduring.

You will know that you are in the final stages of Eat to Love when, more often than not, you eat without struggle, experiencing satisfaction in your food choices. When you Eat to Love, you choose foods as often for enjoyment as for how they make you feel and speak to yourself with compassion. Even though this is the final stage, this path



does not end. It lasts the rest of your life, as your body continues to evolve and change.

Change is the ultimate reality. Each of us progresses through the stages of birth, growth, and puberty. Some of us menstrate, some have children, some breastfeed. Gradually we move through perimenopause and menopause. We experience countless injuries, illnesses, recoveries, and scars. From our very first moment on the Earth, change is constantly happening in our bodies, but we are often only aware of this later in life. By acknowledging the constant nature of change and committing to be with ourselves as we are, we continue to deepen our connection with our bodies, examine the nature of our minds, and stay with our true experience.

As we do this, our bodies find their natural weight, one we can sustain without struggle or deprivation and by responding precisely to internal sensations of hunger, fullness, satisfaction, and preference. You might find it difficult to imagine letting go of the attempt to strongarm your weight, but as you explore this path and all the different components of your experience, your thoughts about weight and weight loss will shift. Though this is a very active process, you do not need to *do* anything to find your natural weight. Your body will take care of it for you.

## Who Eat to Love Is For

Eat to Love is for anyone who has struggled with eating and their body at any time in life. Whether you are a worried eater, a casual or chronic dieter, or someone who has faced an eating disorder, this book will help you come back to the intelligence of your own body and heart. That said, depending on your individual experience, there are different ways you can work with this material.

(A note to men: this book has been written primarily for women. Women are the principal targets of the diet culture and magical eating and have a unique relationship with food and their bodies. That is not to say that men are not affected, but since I am a woman and

work primarily with women, I decided to tailor it to their experience and needs. Because the impact of the diet culture on our relationship with food and body is so primal, many of the practices here are appropriate regardless of gender.)

Eat to Love is not a substitute for appropriate and individualized medical care for anyone who has experienced an eating disorder or other mental health disorder that has affected your ability to consistently care for yourself, regardless of whether or not you have received treatment in the past. Please consider using this book as a complement to, and not a replacement for, the formal support of a treatment team that includes a physician, mental health professional, and registered dietitian. If you are currently under the care of such a team, bring Eat to Love into your work with them and investigate how a meditation practice and the Six Paramitas could help you further your own individual path to peace, sanity, and recovery. If you are not currently working with a treatment team, please explore some of the resources at the end of this book to identify someone to support you. While it may be tempting to take a self-help approach, it is particularly dangerous for those who are experiencing an eating disorder or any mental illness to be isolated while trying to drastically change their approach to eating and body image. You do not have to do this alone. The very act of asking someone for support is brave and is likely to be empowering and liberating. And I cannot emphasize this enough: If you are working with acute or chronic trauma, please consult with a medical professional immediately to determine whether meditation is appropriate for you at this time.

On the other hand, if you fall more in the gray area of unpeaceful eating—perhaps you are a casual dieter who dabbles in cleanses, couch-to-5k challenges, and thirty-day sugar detoxes, or you're a lifetime member of a certain multibillion-dollar weight-loss company—Eat to Love will reorient you to a sustainable way of caring for yourself. I actually love working with people in the gray area: those who don't meet the diagnostic criteria for an eating disorder yet are not at peace with food and their bodies. Your eating and body-image issues may not raise the reddest of red flags, but you may still

be dramatically affected by these struggles and could fly under the radar for much, if not all, of your life.

Whatever unique experience you are coming from, I am so glad you are here. You have chosen a new path. It is one on which there are few right and wrong answers but where there is much respect for the wisdom you already possess. It is a path that will guide you toward a peaceful, satisfying, and joyful relationship with food and your body.

Two caveats before we jump in. First, I am deeply inspired by Buddhist teachings and cannot help but view my work through this lens. Buddhism is a tradition that encourages sincere practitioners to join its teachings with their lives, so, naturally, I have contemplated and taught classic Buddhism in relationship to food and our bodies. But these ideas are my own. Any misunderstandings are also my own and not to be attributed to any of the wonderful texts or perfect teachers mentioned. Second, as an educated, middle-class, able-bodied, thin white woman, I enjoy a significant amount of privilege as I move through the world. I have endeavored to use this privilege to offer something useful to all of us who inhabit a woman's body. That said, I am certain I have fallen short in some areas due to the nature of my experience. I am still learning and look to you as readers and fellow seekers to share with me any thoughts that would benefit this work and us all.