

You were full ten minutes ago

A short book about eating past the point of being full,
because the food is there and stopping feels like a loss

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

Contents

1. Before you start
2. The corner of the lasagne
3. What the extra pays
4. "It still tastes good"
5. "It'd be a waste"
6. "I don't feel full yet"
7. "It was on my plate"
8. "I wasn't really paying attention"
9. "Stopping feels like losing something"
10. "Everyone else is still eating"
11. "It's been a hard day"
12. "I'm just greedy"
13. The decision
14. When the extra comes back
15. The corner of the lasagne again
16. Notes

Before you start

This is a short book. You can read it in two or three evenings.

It's about one habit. Partway through a meal you've had enough. You may notice it and you may not. Either way you carry on, because there's food left on the plate or in the dish, and it's good, and stopping would feel like giving something up. Twenty minutes later you're on the sofa with your waistband undone, wishing you'd stopped when you were comfortable.

This isn't a diet book. It doesn't ban any food, count anything, or tell you what you should eat. It makes no promise about your weight. I don't think pudding is a moral failing, and I think a big Christmas dinner is one of the good things in life. The book has one target, which is the part of a meal that comes after you've had enough. I'll argue that this part gives you much less than it seems to, and that stopping before it costs you much less than it feels as if it will.

Three cautions before we start, and they matter more in this book than in most.

The first is about eating disorders. This book is written for ordinary overeating at ordinary meals. Some people's eating is a different thing. They regularly eat a large amount in a short time and feel unable to stop. It often happens alone or in secret, and they feel ashamed or disgusted afterwards. That may be binge eating disorder. It's a recognised illness, it's treatable, and the NHS advice is to see a GP as soon as you can. The same goes if you ever

make yourself sick after eating, use laxatives to make up for it, or go long periods eating very little. A book about habits isn't the right tool for any of those, and some of its suggestions could make things worse. If you've had an eating disorder in the past, please talk to whoever treats you before trying anything here.

The second is medical. If you have diabetes, are pregnant, or have any condition where a clinician has told you when or how much to eat, their advice comes before mine. Some medicines increase appetite. If you think one of yours does, raise it with whoever prescribed it, and don't stop taking it.

The third is about children. Nothing in this book is meant to be applied to a child's plate. Chapter 4 touches on why.

The middle chapters each take one belief that keeps the fork moving. "It still tastes good." "It'd be a waste." "I don't feel full yet." Each is partly true, and I'll try to give it its due before I argue with it. The notes at the back give the studies I've relied on and their limits. The rest is my own reasoning, and I'll say so where it matters.

The corner of the lasagne

Here's an example. It's a Wednesday evening and you've made a lasagne, a big one, in the dish that feeds six. There are three of you. You serve yourself a good square and sit down, and it's as good as you hoped.

About two thirds of the way through the square, something changes. The edge has gone off your hunger and you feel comfortable. If someone took the plate away at that moment you wouldn't mind much. You don't put this into words, and you may not register it at all. The fork keeps going. You finish the square.

The dish is on the table, still a third full, and you cut yourself another piece, smaller, to be reasonable about it. You eat that. When you clear up, there's a corner left, the crisp one with the browned cheese. It's too small to be worth a box. You eat it standing at the counter, out of the dish, with the serving spoon.

By half past eight you're on the sofa feeling heavy and slightly sick. You're not thinking about how good the lasagne was. You're thinking that you've done it again.

Nothing terrible has happened, and one evening like this does no harm. But if you've picked up this book, it isn't one evening. It happens at most main meals. The takeaway on Friday goes the same way, and so does Sunday lunch at your mother's. So does the hotel breakfast, and the packet of biscuits that was meant to last a week.

I want to split the meal into two parts, because the rest of the book depends on it.

The first part runs from the first mouthful to a point I'll call enough. Enough is the moment when your hunger has gone and you're comfortable. It isn't the same as being full. At enough, you could eat more without discomfort, but you don't need to. It's a quiet signal and easy to miss. This book has no quarrel with anything you eat before it. That goes for the lasagne, for pudding, for chips, and for the cheese.

The second part is everything after that point, and I'll call it the extra. The extra is the last third of the square, the second piece, and the corner from the dish. It's eaten for reasons other than hunger. The food is there, or it's good, or it would be a shame to leave it. Sometimes the meal is pleasant and stopping would end it. Or your attention was elsewhere.

I'll use one more word. Overfull is where the extra leaves you, which is the heavy and sleepy state, a little uncomfortable, that arrives ten or twenty minutes after the meal. Feeling full is often the first sign you consciously notice, and by then you've gone well past enough. That's the meaning of the title.

I should say what this book doesn't claim. It doesn't claim that you eat the wrong things, or that you should eat less in general, or that enjoying food is a problem. It doesn't claim that you're greedy or weak. Chapter 11 takes that up. And it doesn't claim that every meal should stop at enough. A feast now and then is a fine thing,

and chapter 12 keeps a place for it. The claim is about the default. The extra, as a habit, gives you very little, and what it costs is the comfort of most of your evenings.

Before the next chapter, I'd like you to collect a little information without changing anything. For one week, at your main meal, see whether you can catch the moment of enough. Eat exactly as you normally would. Afterwards, make a note of three things. Did you notice the moment? Roughly how much was left at that point? How did you feel half an hour after the meal? You'll miss it at some meals, and that's useful to know too.

What the extra pays

Nobody keeps eating for no reason. If the extra gave you nothing you'd have stopped years ago. So before arguing with it, I want to list what it pays, as fairly as I can. I count six payments.

The first is taste. The food is good and more of it means more of the taste. This is the obvious one, and chapter 3 looks at how true it is.

The second is not wasting. Food left on a plate feels wrong to most people. It feels like money in the bin and an insult to whoever cooked. Finishing it puts that feeling to rest.

The third is that the meal goes on. For many people dinner is the best half hour of the day. You're sitting down, nobody expects anything, and there's something nice in front of you. When the eating stops, the washing up starts, and the evening's jobs after it. Another helping puts that off.

The fourth is comfort. Eating is soothing. After a bad day, a full stomach and a rich taste can dull things for a while. Chapter 10 is about this.

The fifth is belonging. Other people are still eating, or your host is offering more, or the family rule was always that you clear your plate. Carrying on keeps you in step.

The sixth is avoiding a small loss. Stopping with good food still in front of you feels like walking away from something that was yours. It's only a small pang. Still, it comes at every meal, and carrying on is the quickest way to make it go.

Those are real. Now the costs, and I'll leave weight until last because it isn't the centre of this book.

The first cost is the next hour. You're overfull. You feel heavy and dull, and whatever you'd planned for the evening looks like too much effort.

The second is what it does to the memory of the meal. The lasagne was lovely for the first two thirds. But the last thing you felt about it was a mild nausea, and that's what stays with you. The extra takes a good meal and gives it a bad ending.

The third is how you feel about yourself. "I've done it again" is a small daily defeat, and it piles up. For some people it's what sets off the next round. Feeling bad about eating turns into a reason to eat.

The fourth is that the signal gets harder to hear. This is my interpretation and not a finding. If you ride past enough at every meal, you get very little practice at noticing it. Over the years, comfortable stops registering, and overfull becomes the only signal you know.

The fifth is sleep and the night. A heavy stomach at bedtime isn't a recipe for a good night, as most people know from experience.

The sixth is weight and health. Food eaten past need is, by definition, more than your body asked for, and over the years that may show. It may matter to your health and it may not. That's a question for you and your GP, and I've no way of answering it. I've put it last on purpose. I think the habit is worth changing for the sake of your evenings alone, and a book that leads with weight tends to turn into a diet book by the back door.

Here's a question to carry through the rest of the book. When you're partway through a meal, ask, "Am I still hungry, or is it just still here?" You don't have to stop. For now, just notice which answer you get.

"It still tastes good"

This is the most natural belief of the lot. The food is delicious. Each mouthful is a pleasure. Stopping means fewer pleasures, and carrying on means more. If the lasagne was worth eating at the first forkful, it's hard to see why it wouldn't be at the fifteenth.

The trouble is that the fifteenth forkful isn't the first one, and this has been measured. It's among the better established findings in the study of eating, and it goes by the clumsy name of sensory-specific satiety. As you eat a food, the pleasure you get from that particular food falls. Other foods, which you haven't been eating, stay about as appealing as they were.

In one experiment, 48 people were given a four-course lunch. Some got a different food at each course, and some got the same food four times. Before and after, they rated how pleasant various foods tasted. The pleasantness of whatever they'd just eaten dropped quickly, and the foods they hadn't eaten held steady. The people given four different courses ate 60 per cent more energy than the people given the same food four times, mostly in the last two courses. The variety kept resetting their pleasure, so they kept eating.

A second study looked at timing. People rated foods, ate as much as they wanted of one of them, and rated them all again at intervals over the next hour. The biggest drop in pleasure for the food they'd eaten came two minutes after they finished. It didn't build up

slowly as the food was digested. The researchers concluded that it comes from the senses, from the taste and smell and texture of the food in the mouth. It doesn't depend on the stomach filling.

This explains something everyone has noticed, which is that there's always room for pudding. You couldn't face another mouthful of roast beef, and then the crumble arrives and you find you could manage some. That isn't weakness or self-deception. The beef has worn out its welcome with your senses and the crumble hasn't started yet. The same thing is going on at a buffet, where thirty dishes keep resetting the clock.

It also says something about the extra. By the time you've reached enough, you've been eating the same food for ten or fifteen minutes. The pleasure per mouthful has fallen a good way from where it began. It's like playing your favourite song six times in a row. By the sixth time you're barely hearing it, though it's the same song. You're now eating partly from the memory of how good the first mouthfuls were.

Here's the honest objection. "It doesn't fall to nothing. The fifteenth forkful is still nice." I agree. It's still nice, mildly. So the fair comparison isn't between pleasure and no pleasure. On one side is a mild, fading pleasure now. On the other is a comfortable evening, plus the same lasagne tomorrow. Tomorrow you'll be hungry again, and your senses will have recovered. The first forkful then will be as good as the first forkful today.

That last point changes the sum. Stopping at enough doesn't lose you the lasagne. The part you lose is the worst part of it, the forkfuls that were giving you the least. If you keep what's left, you

get its best part a second time.

You can check this at your next meal. Notice how good the first mouthful is, and give it a mark out of ten if you like. When you think you might be at enough, take one more mouthful and mark that. I can't tell you your numbers. I'd be surprised if they matched.

"It'd be a waste"

For a lot of people this is the belief that does the most work, and it was put there early. You may have heard "Finish what's on your plate" at several thousand childhood meals. You may have been told about children elsewhere who had nothing. Pudding may have depended on a clean plate. Your parents or grandparents may have lived through times when food was short, and their rule made complete sense in their world.

The feeling behind it is a good one. Wasting food is a bad thing. It costs money, someone grew it and someone cooked it, and throwing it out is careless. I'm not going to argue you out of caring about that.

The argument is with where you think the waste happens. Consider the last third of the lasagne square, the part after enough. Your body didn't need it. Eaten, it does you no good and some mild harm. In the bin, it does you no good and no harm. In neither case does it feed a hungry person. The food is wasted either way. If you eat it, the waste goes through you on its way out. You've used yourself as the bin.

The real waste happened earlier. It happened when too much was cooked, or too much was served, or too much was ordered. That's also where the fix is. Once the food is on the plate and you've had enough, no good option for that food remains at the table. There are a few bad ones, and eating it when you don't want it is one of them.

There are usually better options than the bin, though, and they're so ordinary that the clean-plate rule skips past them. Leftover lasagne is tomorrow's lunch, and many people think it's better on the second day. Most cooked food keeps in a fridge for a day or two and in a freezer for months. In a restaurant you can ask for a box, and nobody minds. A third of a portion in a box is a whole small meal tomorrow, so it hasn't been wasted at all.

Restaurants bring out a related belief, which is about money. You've paid for it, so you'd better eat it. This is the same mistake that keeps people sitting through a bad film because they bought the ticket. The money is spent whichever you do. What's still open is whether the next ten minutes make your evening better or worse. If you're comfortable now and would be overfull after finishing, then finishing means you pay the bill and get an uncomfortable evening as well.

Then there's the cook. "She'll be hurt if I leave some." Sometimes that's true, and chapter 9 deals with hosts. Mostly what a cook wants to know is that you enjoyed it. You can tell them so, and ask to take some home. That tells them more than a clean plate would.

I mentioned children in the cautions. There's a reason to go gently on the clean-plate rule with them. As I see it, the rule teaches a child to stop eating when the plate is empty and not when they've had enough. One survey of 993 American adults found that people with a stronger habit of clearing their plates tended to weigh more, even allowing for many other factors. It was a single survey, based on people's own reports, and can't show that one causes the other. I mention it because it fits the argument of this book. The rule hands the decision about how much you eat to whoever filled the plate.

The practical upshot is a change in where you aim your dislike of waste. Aim it at the shopping, the cooking and the serving, where it can do some good. Cook the big lasagne, by all means, but plan on two meals from it. Then, when you've had enough and there's food in front of you, the thrifty move is a box with a lid.

"I don't feel full yet"

This one is said in good faith. You're halfway down the plate and you check in with your stomach, and it reports nothing much. You don't feel full. So you carry on, which seems the sensible thing to do. Then, a quarter of an hour after the meal, fullness arrives all at once, and there's far more of it than you wanted.

The belief assumes that your sense of fullness is a live reading, like a fuel gauge. It isn't. It runs behind.

Your body judges how much you've eaten in several ways. A review of the subject in a leading medical journal describes the main ones. There's the stretching of the stomach wall as it fills. And there's a set of hormones released by the gut as food reaches it, which tell the brain that food has arrived. The first responds as the stomach fills. The second depends on food moving on through the stomach and into the intestine, and that takes a while. You'll often hear that it takes twenty minutes for the brain to register fullness. I couldn't trace that figure to any one study, so I wouldn't lean on the number. The general point is sound, though. The signals that say "that's plenty" are still arriving after the meal has ended.

Anyone who's used an old shower knows the problem. You turn the tap, nothing changes for ten seconds, so you turn it further, and then you're scalded. The delay makes you overshoot. With a meal, the faster you eat, the more you can get down in the gap before the signals arrive.

That has been tested. A pooled analysis of 22 experiments looked at what happens when people are made to eat the same meal quickly or slowly. The slow eaters ate less. The important detail is that they weren't hungrier for it. There was no difference in hunger at the end of the meal, or up to three and a half hours later. The fast eaters had taken in more food and got nothing extra for it in satisfaction. The authors note that the studies varied a lot in method and in the size of the effect.

This gives us a better way of reading your own signals. Enough is an early, faint signal. It shows up as a drop in eagerness more than as any feeling in the stomach. The next mouthful matters a little less than the last one did, and you look up from the plate and start talking. Fullness comes later and louder. If you wait for fullness before you stop, you'll overshoot at every meal, because by the time you feel it you're already well past enough. You were full ten minutes ago, and the news has only just arrived.

A reasonable worry follows from this. "If I stop before I feel full, I'll be hungry again in an hour." You might, the first few times, because you may stop too early while you're learning where enough is. If you're properly hungry an hour later, eat something. That's what food is for, and this book never asks you to go hungry. But the pooled experiments suggest it happens less than you'd fear. People who ate less by eating slowly weren't hungrier hours later.

The practical point is about pace and one pause. You don't have to chew each mouthful thirty times or put your fork down between bites, unless you want to. Halfway through the plate, stop for a minute. Have a drink of water, say something to whoever's at the

table, and let the signals catch up a little. Then ask the question from chapter 2. You may find the answer has changed since you sat down.

"It was on my plate"

Ask people why they ate the amount they ate, and they'll mostly say it was how hungry they were. It feels that way from the inside. The evidence says something less flattering. To a large extent, people eat what they're given.

A well-known experiment at Pennsylvania State University had 51 men and women come in for lunch once a week for four weeks. Lunch was macaroni cheese, and they could eat as much or as little as they liked. What changed from week to week was the size of the portion put in front of them, from 500 grams up to a kilo. When they were given the largest portion, they ate 30 per cent more energy than when they were given the smallest. It made no difference whether the food came ready plated or in a dish they served themselves from. The effect didn't depend on whether they were men or women, or on their weight, or on whether they were the dieting type. It showed up in everyone.

That's one study. A Cochrane review, which is about as careful as evidence summaries get, pooled 58 studies with more than 6,600 participants. It found the same thing across the board. People consistently eat more when they're offered larger portions, larger packages or larger plates and bowls. The effect was small to moderate in size, and larger in adults than in children. The reviewers rated the evidence as moderate in quality, and they noted that many of the studies had weaknesses.

Two psychologists at the University of Pennsylvania suggested a reason. They proposed that people treat whatever unit they're given as the right amount. One plateful counts as a meal, and so does one packet or one bowl, almost whatever its size. They showed it with sweets and pretzels left out for people to help themselves. When the pieces were bigger, or the serving spoon was bigger, people took much more, although nothing stopped those with the small spoon from taking a second go. They called it unit bias.

Put this beside the last chapter. Your internal signals are faint and late. The plate, on the other hand, is a clear, present signal that's in front of you the whole time. It says, "this is what a meal is". When a faint signal and a clear one disagree, the clear one usually wins. So in practice, the person who decides how much you eat is whoever served the plate. That was you, ten minutes ago, when you were at your hungriest. Or it was a restaurant, which has its own reasons for generous portions. Or it was a manufacturer deciding how big a sharing bag should be.

I find this a cheering result, for two reasons. The first is that it isn't a flaw in you. It's how people work, all of them, including the thin ones and the disciplined ones. The second is that it moves the decision to a place where it's easy to make. It's hard to stop halfway down a full plate, working against a clear signal with a faint one. Putting a bit less on the plate at the start is no trouble at all.

This isn't rationing, and here's why. Seconds stay allowed, always. The difference is that seconds are a decision and the plate is a default. If you serve a slightly smaller first helping, the plate stops doing your deciding for you. You finish it, pause, and ask whether

you're still hungry. If you are, have more, gladly. Some of the time you'll find you aren't, and you'd never have found that out from behind a full plate.

One practical detail makes a difference. The serving dish on the table is a standing invitation, and the corner of the lasagne gets eaten because it's within reach. Serve from the cooker or the counter, and let seconds cost a walk across the kitchen.

"I wasn't really paying attention"

Think about where you ate your last five meals and what else you were doing. For many people the honest list is a desk with email open, a sofa with the television on, a kitchen counter with a phone, a car. Eating is something that happens while the attention is elsewhere. You look down and the plate's empty, and you have only a faint memory of the food.

This isn't a belief so much as an explanation people give afterwards. It deserves a chapter because a great deal of the extra happens here, out of sight of the person doing it.

A pooled analysis of 24 experiments looked at attention and eating. Eating while distracted, by television or a game or a task, raised how much people ate at that meal by a moderate amount. It had a larger effect on how much they ate later in the day. The authors' explanation is memory. If you weren't attending to the meal, you don't remember it well. Your sense of how much you've eaten today is part of what governs your appetite later. Other experiments in the same review support that. When people were helped to recall a recent meal, they ate less at the next one. When people were prevented from seeing how much they'd eaten, they ate more.

So distraction hits twice. At the meal, you miss the faint signal of enough, because nothing in you was listening for it. Later, you're hungrier than you should be, because the meal never properly registered.

You may be bracing for an instruction to eat in silence, contemplating each raisin. I'm not going to give it. Mealtimes are for talking, and a film with a bowl of pasta on your knee is a fine way to spend a Friday. I'd also note a result from the same review that works against the mindfulness enthusiasts. Simply telling people to be more aware of their food as they ate didn't reliably change how much they ate at that meal.

What I'd suggest is smaller and I think more realistic. There are two moments in a meal when attention earns its keep. The first is the opening few mouthfuls. That's when the food tastes best, as chapter 3 showed, so it's the part most worth being present for. Look at the food, taste it, and let it register that a meal is happening. The second is the halfway pause from chapter 5. For those thirty seconds, take your eyes off the screen and ask the question. The rest of the meal you can spend talking, or watching whatever you like.

There's one kind of eating where I'd go further, which is eating from the packet. Crisps from the bag or biscuits from the sleeve give you no plate to look at and no halfway point, and you can't see how much has gone. It's the condition from the experiments in which people couldn't see what they'd eaten. The fix takes ten seconds. Put what you want in a bowl, put the packet back in the cupboard, and sit down with the bowl. If you want more afterwards, you can get up and fetch it.

"Stopping feels like losing something"

This chapter is about the pang. You've had enough, there's good food in front of you, and you think about putting your fork down. Something in you objects. The objection isn't hunger. It feels more like loss, as if you were being asked to hand back something that was yours. I think this small feeling keeps the fork moving more than hunger does, or even taste.

It helps to ask where the feeling comes from, because it isn't silly. I can think of three sources, and the evidence is good for only one of them.

The first is the way people weigh losses. Giving up something you already have stings more than failing to gain the same thing. Food on your plate is yours in a way that food in the shop isn't. Leaving it is felt as a loss, even if you didn't want it.

The second is old scarcity. If you grew up in a big family where the slow eater got less, or in a house where money was tight, you learned that food in front of you should be eaten now, because it might not be there later. That lesson was correct when you learned it. It can run on for decades after it stopped being true.

The third is dieting, and here there's research. If you've spent years on and off diets, you've taught yourself that good food is always about to be taken away. There's always a Monday coming when the lasagne will be forbidden. That belief makes scarcity real again, because it's you who's about to create it.

Two researchers, Janet Polivy and Peter Herman, spent decades studying this. In one experiment from their group, people were randomly told either that they'd be starting a week-long diet after the session, or nothing of the kind. Then they did a supposed taste test, in which the amount they ate was secretly measured. Among people who were habitual dieters, those expecting the diet ate a good deal more than those who weren't. People who didn't habitually diet ate the same either way. The authors called it eating, drinking and being merry, for tomorrow we diet. Just planning to restrict was enough to set off overeating in the very people who restrict.

An earlier experiment from the same group found a related pattern. People were given a snack beforehand, small or large, and then offered food. Non-dieters who'd had the larger snack ate less afterwards, as you'd expect. Dieters who'd had the larger snack ate more. The usual explanation is that once dieters felt they'd broken their rules for the day, there seemed no point in holding back. It's the thought you may know as "I've blown it now, so I might as well carry on".

Put those together and the pang makes sense. If some part of you believes this food is about to become scarce, because the diet starts tomorrow or because today was already ruined, then each good meal is a last chance. Nobody leaves food on the plate at a last chance.

So the answer to the pang is the opposite of more restraint, and the word for it is permission. The lasagne isn't going anywhere. You can have it tomorrow, because it's in a box in the fridge. You can make it again next week. No Monday is coming on which it'll be

banned, because this book bans nothing and I'd suggest you don't either. The food you like is a permanent part of your life, and you'll go on having it.

Once that's true, and once you believe it, stopping at enough is a different act. At a last chance, stopping is a loss. When there's another meal tomorrow, stopping means you've finished for now. You aren't giving up the lasagne. What you give up is the part of it you wouldn't have enjoyed, and you keep a better part for tomorrow.

You might say, "I'll still feel the pang." You will, for a while. It's a habit of feeling, and those fade slowly. But a pang is a sensation. It's brief, and it passes within a minute or two of the plate leaving your sight. It's far smaller than the discomfort it's been saving you from. Next time it comes, try saying, in your head, "there'll be more tomorrow". Then make sure it's true.

"Everyone else is still eating"

Some of the biggest extras happen in company. Sunday lunch runs to two hours. The curry arrives for six and there are dishes all over the table. Your aunt has made three puddings and would like you to try each one. You stopped being hungry some time ago. But everyone is still picking, the conversation is good, and sitting there with an empty plate feels like leaving the party.

The research confirms what you'd guess. A review of 42 studies found strong evidence that people eat more when they eat with friends or family than when they eat alone. The effect was sizeable. It didn't appear when people ate with strangers. So it isn't the mere presence of other people that does it. It's the ease and the length of a meal among people you like. In the few studies that looked into why, longer meals were part of the explanation. The food stays in front of you for longer, and chapter 6 explained what food in front of you does.

I don't want to treat this as a problem to be got rid of. Eating with people you love is one of the best things there is, and a long lunch is a pleasure in itself. The authors of the review suggest the habit may be very old and may have served a purpose. If the price of your sister's birthday dinner is that you eat more than you need, it's a fair price, and chapter 12 has a name for meals like that.

The trouble is the ordinary shared meal, the one that isn't an occasion, where the extra comes along just because the table was sociable. What you want there is the company without the third

helping. A few things help, and none of them needs an announcement.

Eat slowly, since you've got the time. If the meal is going to last two hours, there's no reason to clear your first plate in ten minutes and then face a table of food with nothing to do.

When you've had enough, keep something in front of you that isn't food. A glass of water, a coffee or a cup of tea all do the job, so that your hands have something to do and nobody sees you sitting with nothing.

If the dishes are within reach, shift them down the table, or offer to clear the ones that are finished with. The picking that happens in the second hour is almost all reach.

Then there's the host who presses. "Go on, there's plenty. You've hardly had anything." This comes from love, or from the old rule that a good host keeps offering and a good guest gives in. Refusing can feel rude. It helps to remember what the host wants, which is to know that the food was good and that you're happy. You can give them that directly. "That was lovely, I couldn't manage another thing. Could I take a piece home?" Praise and a request for leftovers please most hosts more than a reluctant third helping would. If they insist, a small spoonful that you take your time over will do.

The family rule is harder when it's still running in your own head. If you were raised to clear your plate in company, leaving food at your mother's table may feel like defiance at fifty. You don't have to make a stand. Serve yourself less to begin with, if you're allowed near the spoon, and the plate can be cleared honestly.

"It's been a hard day"

You get in late, after a day of being talked at. There's a row you're trying not to think about. Dinner is the first nice thing that's happened since breakfast. You eat it fast, have more, and finish with whatever's in the cupboard. For a little while, things feel softer.

Most people call this comfort eating, and most people who do it feel they understand it well enough. Feeling bad makes them eat. I want to give that its due and then complicate it, because the research here surprised me.

The part to grant is that food does comfort. Eating something rich and warm is pleasant, and pleasure takes the edge off a bad mood for a while. The ritual does some of the work too. You sit down, you stop, and something is provided for you. After a day of giving out, a meal is a moment of being given to. The need underneath is real. You're depleted and you want looking after.

Now the complication. A team in the Netherlands pooled 56 experiments, with 3,670 participants. In each, people were put into a mood in the laboratory and their eating was then measured. If sadness and stress simply drove eating, you'd expect people in a bad mood to eat more across the board. They didn't. Negative moods increased eating in one group, the restrained eaters. Those are people who habitually hold back and diet, the same group as in chapter 8. In other people a bad mood made no reliable difference. That included people who described themselves as emotional eaters. Good moods increased eating in everyone.

I'd be careful with this. A sad film clip in a lab isn't a terrible Tuesday, and the authors say the studies varied a great deal. But it suggests that the simple story is incomplete. What seems to happen, at least in the lab, is that a bad mood doesn't so much create an appetite as loosen a grip. If you spend your days holding your eating in check, a hard day uses up whatever you were holding it with. The rules go, and the "might as well" from chapter 8 takes over. On this reading, the hard-day extra is another product of restriction. It's one more reason for the policy of permission. If no rules are being held up, there's nothing for a hard day to knock down.

The other finding is worth a thought too. Good moods raised eating across the board. Celebrations, Fridays and holidays are at least as likely as misery to produce the extra. That matches most people's experience if they think about it.

So what about the real need, the wanting to be looked after at the end of a bad day? I'd ask what the extra delivers. The first plate is comforting, and I've no argument with a good dinner as a consolation. The extra adds a few more minutes of the same, at a fading rate, as chapter 3 described. Then comes an hour of feeling heavy and cross with yourself, and that's an odd way to treat someone who's had a hard day.

Better comforts exist, and you know what yours are. A bath might be one, or an early night. You could ring the friend who makes you laugh. A walk round the block in the dark would do, or a programme you love, or ten minutes of complaining to someone who'll listen. None of those is as close to hand as the cupboard,

which is why the cupboard wins. It helps to decide in advance. Write down two things that reliably make you feel looked after, and on a bad day, have dinner and then one of them.

If hard days lead to eating that feels out of control, in large amounts, often, and with shame afterwards, that's beyond the reach of this chapter. Chapter 13 says where to take it.

"I'm just greedy"

Under all the other beliefs there's often a verdict. You eat too much because of what you are. Other people can leave half a sandwich. You've never left half of anything. You think about food more than seems normal, and you suspect you've a bigger appetite than other people and less character.

I'd like to take the verdict apart, because I think it's wrong, and because it makes the habit worse.

Start with appetite. Two American researchers, Michael Lowe and Meghan Butryn, drew a distinction that I find useful. There's hunger that comes from the body needing energy. And there's appetite that comes from good food being present, in someone who doesn't need energy at all. They called the second hedonic hunger. Their argument was that in a world where tasty food is everywhere, a large part of eating is driven by the second kind. That isn't a defect. It's the ordinary response of an ordinary person to being surrounded by things designed to be delicious. They also developed a questionnaire measuring how strongly people feel the pull of food that's nearby, and scores do vary. Some people feel it more than others, the way some feel the cold more.

So you may well be someone on whom food in the room has a stronger pull. That isn't greed. Greed is a moral word, about wanting more than your share at others' expense. Feeling a strong pull from a plate of roast potatoes is a fact about your wiring and your kitchen. It calls for some practical arrangements, and the

evidence so far has been that arrangements work. Portions, plates, the reach of the dish and the pace of the meal all have more say than character, in everyone who's been tested.

Now the harm the verdict does. Shame is a poor tool for changing how you eat. Chapter 8 described the pattern. A person who feels they've failed decides they might as well carry on. The harsher the judgement, the bigger the sense of failure, and the more there is to eat away. Shame also pushes eating out of sight. People who feel judged for their appetite take small polite helpings in company and eat the rest standing at the fridge later. Hidden eating is fast and distracted, and you don't enjoy it. It breaks every condition this book has described for noticing enough.

You might worry that without the harsh verdict you'd lose all control. "If I stop being hard on myself, I'll eat everything." I understand the fear. But look at the record. You've been hard on yourself for years, and the extra is still there. The harshness hasn't been working as a brake.

The more accurate description of you is dull and kind. You like food, which is a good trait in a person. You live among large portions and full cupboards. You were taught to clear your plate. Your fullness signals run late, like everyone's. You've probably dieted, which taught you that food is about to be taken away. Put any human being in that position and they'd eat past enough most nights. The job now is to change the arrangements, and your character can be left as it is.

The decision

Everything so far has been about seeing the habit clearly. This chapter is about what to do, and it starts with a rule.

I eat what I like, I stop at enough, and what's left is for later.

Each part does a job. "What I like" is the permission from chapter 8. No food is off the list, because forbidding things is what makes each meal feel like a last chance. "I stop at enough" is the change. "What's left is for later" is the answer to both waste and loss. Putting your fork down doesn't mean giving anything up. The food has only been postponed.

Notice what the rule doesn't say. It sets no amounts and names no foods. It has nothing to say about weight, and it doesn't ask you to be hungry, ever. If you stop and find yourself properly hungry an hour later, eat. That's the rule working, and you'll learn from it where your enough is.

Here's the method I'd suggest for keeping it. It has six parts. Each rests on an earlier chapter. The combination is mine and hasn't been tested as a package.

Serve a little less, and allow seconds. Put slightly less on the plate than you usually would, from a dish that stays on the counter. Seconds are always allowed, after a pause of a few minutes. This takes the decision away from the plate and gives it back to you. It comes from chapter 6.

Taste the first few mouthfuls. For the first minute of the meal, do nothing but eat. Look at the food, taste it, and let it register that a meal is happening. After that, talk or watch as you please.

Pause at halfway. When the plate is about half empty, put your cutlery down for a minute. Have a drink of water. Ask the question, "Am I still hungry, or is it just still here?" If you're still hungry, carry on, and ask again near the end.

Make a full stop. When you reach enough, do something that ends the meal. Put your knife and fork together and move the plate out of reach. Box up what's left straight away, before you sit back down, so there's no corner to pick at later. Then have something that marks the end. A cup of tea or coffee does it for many people. So does a piece of fruit, or clearing the table, or brushing your teeth if it's late. The meal needs an ending that isn't an empty dish.

Ban nothing and make up for nothing. Keep every food you like in your life. When you overeat, which you will, the next meal is an ordinary meal at the ordinary time. Don't skip breakfast to pay for dinner, and don't start a diet on Monday. Chapter 8 showed what the promise of a diet does to the meal before it.

Choose your feasts. Some meals are meant to be big. Christmas dinner, a birthday, or the restaurant you've been looking forward to for a month all count. Decide beforehand that it's a feast, eat as much as you enjoy, and afterwards don't hold a post-mortem. Feasts have been part of every culture that could afford them. What this book is against is the accidental feast on a Wednesday.

Habits respond well to plans made in advance in a "when, then" form, because the plan attaches a new action to the old cue. Three are worth writing out now, in your own words.

When I notice I've had enough, then I put my knife and fork together and move the plate.

When I think "it'd be a waste", then I get a box for it.

When I've eaten too much anyway, then my next meal is an ordinary one at the ordinary time.

Here's what to expect. Leaving food on a plate will feel wrong for weeks, if you were raised as most of us were. The pang from chapter 8 will turn up at most meals to begin with. You'll miss enough altogether at plenty of meals, especially fast or distracted ones, and find yourself overfull as before. None of that means it isn't working. Enough is a quiet signal, and I think it gets easier to hear with practice. I can't point to a study that proves so.

I can't promise anything about your weight. If you drop the extra, you'll be eating somewhat less, and what that does differs from person to person. If weight matters for your health, take that up with your GP. What I'd expect is smaller and sooner. Within a couple of weeks you should be able to say whether your evenings feel different. Look back at your notes from chapter 1 and compare the half hour after dinner. That's the measure to go by.

When the extra comes back

It will come back. Holidays do it, with hotel breakfasts and meals out twice a day. Christmas runs for a fortnight. A stressful month, an illness or a family visit can all bring it back. Then one evening you're on the sofa, overfull, thinking that you've undone everything.

You haven't undone anything. One overfull evening is one overfull evening. It doesn't show that you misunderstood the book or didn't want it enough. An old habit sits under a new one for a long time, and disrupted weeks bring it up.

The risk doesn't lie in the meal. It lies in what you do next, and chapter 8 described it. "I've blown it, so I might as well carry on." "I'll be good from Monday." Both thoughts turn one meal into a week. The better response is small and plain, and it's the third plan from the last chapter. The next meal is an ordinary meal, at the ordinary time, in an ordinary amount. You don't skip it to make up, and you don't make it extra small. You serve a little less, taste the first mouthfuls, pause at halfway, and make a full stop. I'd advise against counting good days, because a streak makes one bad meal feel like a collapse.

It's worth a minute's thought about what brought it back. Often the arrangements slipped. The serving dish went back on the table, or dinner moved to the sofa, or the packets came out without a bowl. Those are easy to put right. Sometimes a diet crept back in, and with it the feeling that good food is about to be taken away.

Sometimes it's been a hard stretch and food has been doing the comforting. In that case look again at the list you made in chapter 10.

There are times when the right response is professional help, and I want to be clear about them. See a GP in any of these cases.

- You regularly eat a large amount in a short time and feel unable to stop. That's especially so if you eat very fast, eat when you aren't hungry, eat alone or in secret, and feel ashamed, guilty or disgusted afterwards. That pattern may be binge eating disorder. The NHS advice is to see a GP as soon as you can. Treatment usually begins with a guided self-help programme, and a talking therapy may follow. Eating disorder charities also run confidential helplines.
- You make yourself sick, take laxatives, or exercise hard to make up for eating.
- You go long periods eating very little, or you're frightened of gaining weight to a degree that rules your day.
- Your appetite has changed sharply for no clear reason, or you're very thirsty, or losing or gaining weight without trying. Those need checking for medical causes.
- You think a medicine is driving your appetite. Raise it with the prescriber and keep taking it meanwhile.
- Your mood has been low for weeks and food is the main thing holding you up. Or you've had thoughts of harming yourself, which needs urgent help the same day from your GP, an emergency service or a crisis line.

None of those is a failure of willpower, and none is rare. They're conditions with treatments, and the treatments are better than anything a short book can offer.

The corner of the lasagne again

Go back to the Wednesday in chapter 1, with a few things moved.

You've made the same big lasagne, and you've planned two meals from it. The dish stays on the counter. You serve yourself a square a little smaller than last time and sit down. The first few mouthfuls have your whole attention, and they're as good as you'd hoped.

Halfway through, you put your fork down and have some water, and someone tells you about their day. You pick the fork up again, because you're still hungry. A few mouthfuls from the end, the eagerness drops. You check, and find that you aren't hungry any more, and the rest is just still there. There's a small pang, smaller than it used to be. You think, "there'll be more tomorrow". You put your knife and fork together.

You get up and cut what's left in the dish into portions, corner included, and put them in boxes in the fridge. You put the kettle on. At half past eight you're on the sofa with a cup of tea, comfortable, thinking that was a good lasagne. Tomorrow at lunch, hungry, you'll eat the crisp corner, and it'll be better than it would have been tonight.

That's all the change looks like, and I don't want to oversell it. You'll still overeat sometimes, and sometimes on purpose, which is as it should be. The studies I've relied on are mostly short experiments on single meals. The method is my own assembly and untested as a whole. This book hasn't promised you a different body, and it doesn't promise one now.

What I'm confident of is the narrow claim I began with. The part of the meal after enough gives you little, because the taste has faded by then. The waste has already happened, and the fullness you're waiting for is on its way. Stopping feels like a loss mainly because you've learned to treat each good meal as the last. It isn't the last, since there'll be more tomorrow.

If you do one thing after closing this book, make it the pause. Halfway through your next meal, put your fork down for a minute and ask whether you're still hungry, or whether it's just still there. Then do whatever the honest answer suggests.

Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't medical, dietary or psychological advice, and it's no substitute for a doctor, dietitian or therapist who knows your situation.

I've kept sources out of the chapters so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes the split between enough and the extra in chapter 1, and the list of payments and costs in chapter 2. It also includes the argument about where waste happens in chapter 4.

A general caution applies. Most experiments on eating measure one meal, in a laboratory, often with students, and the food is whatever suited the researchers. They show what pushes intake up or down at a sitting. They're much weaker evidence about what happens over months in a person's own kitchen. I've also left out some well-known studies on purpose. Several famous experiments on portion cues and "mindless" eating came from a laboratory whose work was later found to be unreliable, and a number of its papers were retracted. I haven't used any of them.

Chapter 3. Rolls, Van Duijvenvoorde and Rolls, "Pleasantness changes and food intake in a varied four-course meal", *Appetite* 5, 1984, pages 337 to 348. Hetherington, Rolls and Burley, "The time course of sensory-specific satiety", *Appetite* 12, 1989, pages 57 to 68. The participants in the second study were women of normal

weight who weren't dieting. The first description of the effect in people is Rolls, Rolls, Rowe and Sweeney, "Sensory specific satiety in man", *Physiology and Behavior* 27, 1981, pages 137 to 142.

Chapter 4. Robinson, Aveyard and Jebb, "Is plate clearing a risk factor for obesity? A cross-sectional study of self-reported data in US adults", *Obesity* 23, 2015, pages 301 to 304. The participants were mostly young, with an average age of 31, and 60 per cent were men. The view that the clean-plate rule teaches children to stop by the plate and not by their appetite is a common one among researchers. I haven't cited a study for it.

Chapter 5. Cummings and Overduin, "Gastrointestinal regulation of food intake", *Journal of Clinical Investigation* 117, 2007, pages 13 to 23. Robinson, Almiron-Roig, Rutters, de Graaf, Forde, Tudur Smith, Nolan and Jebb, "A systematic review and meta-analysis examining the effect of eating rate on energy intake and hunger", *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 100, 2014, pages 123 to 151. One of the authors worked for a food company's research centre. The description of enough as a drop in eagerness is mine.

Chapter 6. Rolls, Morris and Roe, "Portion size of food affects energy intake in normal-weight and overweight men and women", *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 76, 2002, pages 1207 to 1213. Hollands, Shemilt, Marteau, Jebb, Lewis, Wei, Higgins and Ogilvie, "Portion, package or tableware size for changing selection and consumption of food, alcohol and tobacco", *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2015, issue 9, CD011045. The review covered 72 studies in all, most of them American, and judged them to be at unclear or high risk of bias. The reviewers weren't sure that shrinking portions that are already small works as well as

shrinking large ones. Geier, Rozin and Doros, "Unit bias: a new heuristic that helps explain the effect of portion size on food intake", *Psychological Science* 17, 2006, pages 521 to 525.

Chapter 7. Robinson, Aveyard, Daley, Jolly, Lewis, Lycett and Higgs, "Eating attentively: a systematic review and meta-analysis of the effect of food intake memory and awareness on eating", *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 97, 2013, pages 728 to 742. The idea of attending to the opening mouthfuls and the halfway pause, and not the whole meal, is mine.

Chapter 8. That losses weigh more than equal gains is a standard finding in the psychology of decisions, associated with Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. Applying it to food on a plate is my step, as is the point about childhood scarcity. Urbszat, Herman and Polivy, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we diet: effects of anticipated deprivation on food intake in restrained and unrestrained eaters", *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 111, 2002, pages 396 to 401. Herman and Mack, "Restrained and unrestrained eating", *Journal of Personality* 43, 1975, pages 647 to 660. The wider argument is in Polivy and Herman, "Dieting and bingeing: a causal analysis", *American Psychologist* 40, 1985, pages 193 to 201. These were laboratory studies of a single eating occasion. The policy of permission follows from them but wasn't tested in them.

Chapter 9. Ruddock, Brunstrom, Vartanian and Higgs, "A systematic review and meta-analysis of the social facilitation of eating", *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 110, 2019, pages 842 to 861. Only two of the studies examined why the effect happens.

Chapter 10. Evers, Dingemans, Junghans and Boevé, "Feeling bad or feeling good, does emotion affect your consumption of food? A meta-analysis of the experimental evidence", *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 92, 2018, pages 195 to 208. The reading of a bad mood as loosening a grip, not creating an appetite, is close to the authors' own but the wording is mine.

Chapter 11. Lowe and Butryn, "Hedonic hunger: a new dimension of appetite?", *Physiology and Behavior* 91, 2007, pages 432 to 439. The questionnaire is described in Lowe and others, "The Power of Food Scale: a new measure of the psychological influence of the food environment", *Appetite* 53, 2009, pages 114 to 118. The argument that shame makes the habit worse is mine, built on the studies under chapter 8.

Chapter 12. Plans in "when, then" form are from Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The six-part method as a whole is mine and hasn't been tested as a package by anyone.

Chapter 13. The description of binge eating disorder and the advice to see a GP follow the NHS page on the condition, read in September 2026. It's written for England, and services differ elsewhere.