

GOOD GIRLS AND REBELS

By Geneen Roth

I was standing near the buffet at a party recently with two women I'd never met. One eyed the garlic mashed potatoes and said, "Oh God, it looks so good! But I promised myself I'd stay on a low-carb diet for at least three weeks, and this is only day two." The other woman said, "I told myself I would lose weight this year, and I haven't lost a pound. Diets never work for me, though. The second anyone tells me what to eat or when, I feel like rebelling and devouring an entire cake." They both looked at me. "What about you?" the first woman said.

Uh-oh, I thought. The minute I tell strangers what I do, especially strangers gathered around a table of food, conversation comes to a screeching halt, forks freeze in midair, and everyone suddenly thinks they have to be on their best behavior. I become the death of the party.

So this time, I tried another strategy. I told my new friends I'd done a lot of research and discovered that most women who are concerned about their weight fall into one of two eating types: Permitters and Restrictors. I also said they were perfect examples of each type. Instead of fleeing, they asked me to tell them more.

About half of us, I told them – the Restrictors – do very well on diets (at least for a while). We find rules, tips, and lists comforting. When calories counted most, Restrictors knew how many were in a small apple, a baked potato, a Krispy Kreme donut. When the au courante measurement became the glycemic index, we knew how many grams of fat, protein, and carbohydrate were in a serving of string beans, a hamburger the size of your palm, a pat of butter. Restrictors like regulations because they provide a sense of control over the uncertainty and unpredictability of being alive.

Permitters, on the other hand, abhor rules. We find them oppressive and suffocating. Although we know we could stand to lose a pound or 50, we're suspicious of programs and food lists. Permitters are the type of emotional eaters who say, "Gee, I can't understand how I gained 10 pounds in the past two months. I thought I was doing so well." Whereas Restrictors maintain hyper vigilance about food, Permitters prefer denial. Our (usually unconscious) logic: *If I'm not aware of it, it can't hurt me. If I give up trying, I won't be disappointed when I fail.* Like Restrictors, Permitters crave safety, but unlike Restrictors, we see no point in trying to control the uncontrollable; we prefer to join the party and have a good time.

During the 17 years I dieted and binged, Restrictor was my middle name. I loved the latest diet fads, adored the feeling of being good, trying hard, doing what I was told, because it filled me with hope that everything would turn out well. Although I didn't realize it then I was certain that since the size of my body seemed to be the cause of my suffering, I could control what was wrong in my life by controlling my weight.

It didn't work, or course. Eventually, the deprivation of dieting would become intolerable for me and I'd begin binging on whatever I hadn't allowed myself to eat. Then I'd feel out of control and tell myself that my pain was because of my weight, and I'd diet again. Ahh, the life of a Restrictor.

A friend I'll call Linda, a Permitter, has only been on a diet once in her life – and says it was “like living in hell.” When we go out to eat, she doesn't think for a second about the amount of fat or carbs in her order. Although she's 30 pounds over weight, her motto is “Carpe diem, darling.” She tells me she wants to lose weight, that her thighs are rubbing together, but then it's time for another meal – another chance to seize the day, and the cupcake. Still, she suffers (in secret) as much as any Restrictor over the size of her body, and doesn't know what to do, since she believes it's hopeless to follow a program or a diet.

After I'd told the women at the party about the two types of eaters, the Restrictor said, “You described me exactly! So tell me exactly what to do about it!” Then she caught herself and we had a good laugh. She'd said what any Restrictor would say: “Great! Now give me the rules to follow so that I can fix it!” The Permitter's response was less enthusiastic. She looked at me suspiciously, crossed her arms and grudgingly said, “Well, I suppose you have me pegged as well, but don't tell me what to do because I'll only rebel!” I smiled, because her reaction was utterly typical of give-me-a rule-and-I'll break it Permitters. Since we were still near the food table, and I was ready to dig into those mashed potatoes, I game them the condensed version of my message: “Listen to your body. Trust what it tells you. You won't go wrong. Now let's put some food on our plates and talk about something else!”

In another setting, I would have gone on to say this: If you're a Permitter, you already know that starting a program with rules is usually the first step in breaking those rules and going off that program. So here's another approach: Forget rules, and begin with awareness. Just awareness. Since Permitters use food to numb themselves and thus block out body signals, begin by paying attention a few times a day to concrete physical sensations like hunger and fullness. Allow yourself to notice the plate of food in front of you and your body's response to it. It's important that you don't give yourself a hard time. If you find yourself standing in front of the fridge without knowing how you got there, be gentle with yourself. Remember that if you give yourself rigid rules to follow, you'll rebel. So eat according to your physical hunger, and stop when you've had enough. Begin slowly: You can decide, for instance, that once a day, you'll eat only when you're hungry. When you've gotten the hang of that add stopping when you've had enough. The goal is to begin respecting your body by listening to its signals.

If you're a Restrictor, you know when you're hungry and when you're full, but you have too many rules and food facts in your head that it's hard for you to figure out what your body actually wants. The very idea of sweet potatoes with butter can trigger panic. You live in your head and eat in your head, so, as with Permitters, it will be very helpful for you to pay attention to what your body wants. For a Restrictor, part of breaking free from compulsive eating is trusting that your body wants to feel well, to be nourished, and to thrive, and that if you listen to it, it won't betray you.

I've found that it gives people tremendous relief to be able to recognize themselves as either Restrictors or Permitters. They become more aware of their needs and how to meet them, which helps them to begin the process of breaking free from their compulsive eating. They feel comforted because they know there are plenty of other people out there like them. That's especially important for emotional eaters; knowing we're not alone nourishes our hungry hearts. ***