WithAll

THE TRUTH ABOUT DIETS

Our culture is filled with conflicting messages about diets. On one hand, they are often celebrated as signs of discipline and dedication to health. On the other, they are criticized as harmful, shallow, and unsustainable. This confusion is made worse by the diet industry's massive influence, as it often profits from spreading myths and stoking insecurities about weight and health.

With so much conflicting information, it can be difficult to discern reliable guidance—not only for managing our own health and eating habits but also for understanding what we model and communicate with the kids in our lives.

To help untangle these messages, we've partnered with Dr. Charlotte Markey, a health psychologist at Rutgers University, who specializes in the psychology of eating, body image, and health.

> Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

Author unknown (although often attributed to Albert Einstein, German-born theoretical physicist & Nobel Prize winner)

What is a diet?

A diet is a specific eating plan that someone may follow, usually with the goal of weight loss.

Chances are you have been on a diet before or taken part in some sort of food fad, whether it be a juice cleanse, intermittent fasting, or a commitment to cut sugar out of your life. Why wouldn't you want to look and feel great? That's what marketing for food fads and diets suggests will happen if you just do what they recommend. The problem is that these are empty promises.

Dieting is big business; the "health" recommendations about our appearance, bodies, and weight are not typically offered by altruistic health professionals seeking to help us feel good about ourselves and live long, healthy lives. They're offered by unregulated companies looking to make money and contribute to a culture of dieting.

Diet culture, our culture's adoption of thinness or muscularity as a symbol of status, beauty, and competence, tells us we must control our bodies instead of caring for them. It leaves us feeling dissatisfied with who we are and offers a range of "solutions" for this dissatisfaction. Of course, these "solutions" either don't help, don't last, or cause harm, and rarely are they based on scientific evidence.

While it might feel easier to avoid this knowledge, being aware and taking simple, thoughtful actions can make a big difference in supporting our children's health.

3 Problems with Diets

1 THEY DON'T WORK – AND THEY USUALLY BACKFIRE

In studies that follow people across time, nearly everyone who starts a diet doesn't stick with it long-term and gains back any weight they lost within two years. In fact, most gain additional weight, too.

One reason food fads and diets tend to fail is because they typically involve restriction of foods that we like to eat! Also, at the most basic level, our bodies don't respond to food restriction in the way we typically want them to. Our bodies are hard-wired to respond to restriction as if we are starving and need to be saved. Usually, this means that restriction is met with an increase in food cravings and a focus on food.

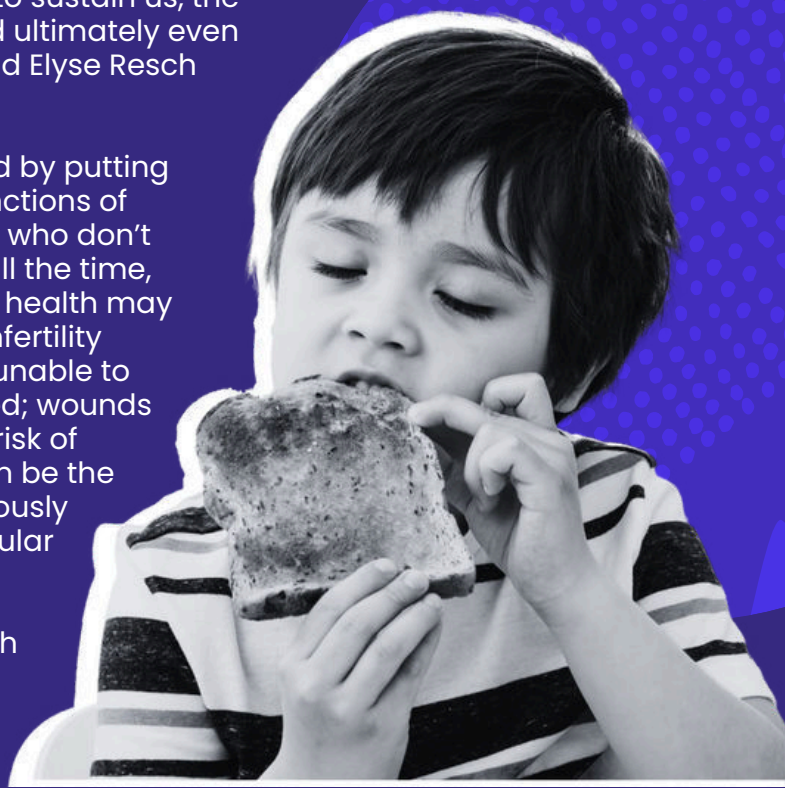
2 FOOD FADS AND DIETS TAKE UP A LOT OF MENTAL SPACE

If you're focusing a lot on what you can or can't eat – eating being something you're likely to do throughout the day – this is going to distract from other things that you could (and possibly should) be doing. Sometimes scientists refer to this as "attentional focus" or "bandwidth." We only have so much mental space, attentional focus, or bandwidth, but in resisting fads and diets we can preserve some of this. When the latest diet tempts you, keep in mind that deciding to diet means deciding not to do other things, or not do other things as well as you could have. Is this a choice you want to make? Is this something we want our kids to spend their time thinking about?

3 THE PHYSICAL CONSEQUENCES CAN BE DEVASTATING

If our bodies do not get the nutrients they need to sustain us, the physical consequences can be devastating and ultimately even deadly. As registered dietitians Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch have said, “a dieting body is a starving body.”

When we do not eat enough, our bodies respond by putting our limited resources into the most essential functions of living, depriving other physical functions. People who don’t eat enough may be sensitive to cold, feel tired all the time, experience osteoporosis, and their reproductive health may suffer, resulting in menstrual irregularities and infertility among those born female. Our bodies are also unable to protect us and heal when we are undernourished; wounds may heal slowly and we may be at heightened risk of contracting infections. Perhaps most serious can be the cardiac risks that may result, leading to dangerously low blood pressure and even arrhythmias (irregular heartbeat). This has even more profound consequences for kids whose bodies are supposed to be growing and developing through their teen years.



What to do Instead (for Your Kids)

Dieting is harmful all by itself, and it is also one of the strongest predictors of disordered eating and eating disorders. What this means is that people who diet are vulnerable to harmful eating patterns. In fact, many diets actually recommend disordered eating (e.g., skipping meals, cutting out food groups, etc.).

To help foster healthy relationships with food for the kids in your life, try focusing on these two powerful shifts:

1. Don’t label foods as “good” or “bad” –food isn’t a moral issue. It is a gift to your kids to help them learn to enjoy food. If this doesn’t come naturally to you, fake it until you make it. Being relaxed about food and trying to enjoy it will benefit both you and your child(ren).
2. WithAll suggests avoiding linking food to appearance (i.e., weight, size, shape).

What to do Instead (for You)

FOCUS ON YOUR HEALTH – PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL

If you want to change your habits – concerning food, exercise, or anything, really – be sure you are making changes that are backed by science. If you've fallen away from routines that make you feel good and are good for your body and mind, trying to change your habits is OK. However, aiming for appearance standards that are impossible or harmful will never serve our health or well-being.

MAKE SMALL, SUSTAINABLE CHANGES

The biggest mistake people tend to make when they decide to change a health habit is that they don't focus on sustainable goals. People aren't always good at being honest with themselves about their current habits and about the likelihood of maintaining their desired goals. You're best off making small changes to your habits that you can stick with.

Dr. Charlotte Markey is a professor of psychology at Rutgers University and author of The Body Image Book series. This information comes from her latest book, Adultish: The Body Image Book for Life. For more information about dieting, body image, and Dr. Markey's books, go to TheBodyImageBook.com.

We hope these insights are helpful for you and the kids in your life. To explore these topics further, WithAll invites you to check out these additional resources:

Adultish: The Body Image Book for Life

By Charlotte Markey

What to Say for Me

An 8-week online course for finding peace with your body & food – for you & your kids

WithAll

Copyright ©2026 by WithAll | All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

WithAll

JOIN THE WITHALL COMMUNITY

Sign up for our email newsletter to get exclusive event invites, learn how your support helps recovery, and get more What to Say tips.

Join Us

WANT MORE FREE RESOURCES?

Get free guides and articles on picky eating, big appetites, body comments, sports, and more at withall.org/resources

Feel free to share this guide with whoever needs it. Print it, email it, or text a link.

follow us!

@withallorg

/withallorg

@withall_org

GO DEEPER IN YOUR ROLE

- **Parents and families:** Learn the 3 Simple Shifts at withall.org/shifts
- **Teachers:** Build a body-healthy school culture at withall.org/schools
- **Coaches:** Get your free What to Say certification at withall.org/coaches
- **Healthcare providers:** Earn CME credit at withall.org/healthcare

Support This Work

This guide is one piece of WithAll's work to help kids feel good in their bodies and with food. That work only happens because individuals and businesses fund it directly. If it helped you, consider making a gift at withall.org/donate.

Get Financial Help

If you or someone you love is facing an eating disorder, you are not alone. Our Recovery Support Program provides grants for groceries and housing during intensive treatment. Apply at withall.org/apply.

Copyright ©2026 by WithAll | All rights reserved

WithAll is a registered 501(c)(3)