

food: the good girl's drug

How to Stop Using Food to Control Your Feelings

SUNNY SEA GOLD



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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praise for food: the good girl's drug

“Sunny Sea Gold is one of the best and most compassionate educators about women’s health issues out there. She is especially strong on the emotional underpinnings of health conditions such as eating disorders and obsessive thinking about body image that have deep roots in a gender context. Anyone who is concerned about the emotional roots of her (or his) food or body issues will be enlightened and helped by Gold’s clear, well-informed, evocative, and caring exploration.”

—Naomi Wolf, author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *The Beauty Myth*, *The End of America* and *Give Me Liberty*

“Sunny Gold has found the formula for using her own experience of recovering from binge eating disorder to motivate others to triumph over theirs. This is not a passive read! Sunny engages us with her own stories and those of other good girls who have used food as a drug, and then creates a 3-D reading experience with exercises, thought questions, and advice on how to develop a toolkit to overcome an unhealthy relationship with food. Reading *Food: The Good Girl’s Drug* feels less like reading a book and more like participating in a motivational workshop.”

—Cynthia M. Bulik, Ph.D., director, University of North Carolina Eating Disorders Program and author of *Crave: Why You Binge Eat and How to Stop*

“Sharing deeply personal stories of hope and recovery from the prison of problematic relationships with food, eating, and exercise, Sunny Gold and the brave women who with her offer their insights contribute to a comprehensive survey of the topic in a manner that is remarkably, if you will. . . . easily digestible.”

—Dr. Drew Pinsky, M.D., host of *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew*

“Sunny Sea Gold has created more than a recovery bible for binge eaters—she’s shined a light on a wickedly dark chapter in many women’s lives, where food and secret eating become substitutes for love, and authentic connection. The insights and exercises in this book are relative, easy to do, and can be really quite a valuable tool in moving beyond overeating and creating a life where food is nutritious and self-love is abundant.”

—Jessica Weiner, self-esteem expert and author of *Life Doesn’t Begin 5 Pounds from Now*

“As I travel the country talking to young women about self esteem, I find that *far* too many are obsessed with dieting and being thin. Their obsessions often backfire into overeating and feeling out of control about food, so I’m happy I now have a book to recommend to them that will help them get normal about food and their bodies again.”

—Whitney Thompson, winner of America’s Next Top Model, Cycle 10, founder

“A wonderfully honest, insightful, and important resource for understanding the challenges, pain, and confusion of binge eating disorder. Sunny Sea Gold has masterfully woven her own personal experiences throughout, sharing assurances that those affected by the illness are not alone but recovery is achievable, and the hope for a normal healthy life is possible. This is a timely must read for the weight-focused world, to grasp that not all eating disorders look alike, but they do all create personal hardship and health risks.”

—Lynn S. Grefe, president and CEO, National Eating Disorders Association

“*Food: The Good Girl’s Drug* is a must read for anyone, anywhere along their path to recovery from binge eating. Filled with actionable tools, rich insight, and expert knowledge, this book helps the reader develop a practical skill set to live their life beyond eating disorders. Truly a compelling, authentic, and invaluable book!”

—Johanna Kandel, executive director of The Alliance for Eating Disorders and author of *Life Beyond Your Eating Disorder*

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This book is dedicated to every young woman who has ever hated her body and felt out-of-control about food, including the twenty-four brave and incredibly honest young women who shared their stories of struggle and recovery for this book. Keep moving forward and you can live a life that's healthy, happy, and free!

acknowledgments

My mother, Melinda Schnarre, and my father, Richard Green, are two very brave souls. While writing this book, I sent them each chapter as I finished it, always worried that one or both would call or e-mail to say they were hurt by something and they wanted me to make a change. That never happened. My parents were both incredibly supportive—100 percent willing to allow me to put their divorce, our family's home life, and even their personal quirks on display in order to help girls and women who are suffering with food the way I once did. I respect them immensely for that, and am grateful. My stepfather, George, was equally supportive, and I thank him for that—and all the late-night talks we had when I was a teenager, too.

Of course, no one was more helpful to me throughout the process of writing this book than my husband, John. For six months during the winter and spring of 2010—during our very first year of marriage—I dedicated nearly all of my free time, and every single weekend, to interviewing girls and experts, researching, and writing. John never complained, even when he had to do all the laundry and grocery shopping. He's the best partner a girl could ask for.

There's an amazing group of women to whom I will be eternally grateful and without whom this book would not have been possible: the women of the Woodhull Institute for Ethical Leadership, a nonprofit organization that provides leadership training and professional development for women. First, I owe Kristen Kemp, herself the author of some fourteen books and a lecturer for Woodhull, a thank-you. She's the one who first told Wende Jager-Hyman, Woodhull's executive director, about the book I wanted to write. Kristen knew that once the cat was out of the bag, Wende wouldn't let me chicken out or drop the ball. And Wendy didn't. She immediately signed me up for a nonfiction writer's retreat during which Woodhull cofounder and famous feminist author Naomi Wolf taught me and several other starstruck students how to create and write a book proposal. After leaving that workshop—and getting a thumbs-up on the idea from Naomi—I knew this book was important and I would do whatever it took to get it published. Wende's involvement didn't end there. She also introduced me to her nonfiction author daughter, Joie, who, in turn, introduced me to her literary agent, Laurie Abkemeier.

When I met Laurie, I knew I had found the smart, savvy, and dedicated partner I needed to sell this book—which she did in just six weeks! Laurie is a former book editor herself, and was just the right mix of creative and no-nonsense businesswoman for a nervous first-time author like me. I'm grateful for all of her input, from the proposal stage to the cover, to the finished manuscript.

Thank you also to Morgan Holland, the research assistant who helped me keep HealthyGirl.org afloat with her incredibly astute and insightful blog posts while I was typing furiously away on my laptop.

An enormous thank-you to my colleagues and mentors in the magazine world, namely Wendy Naugle, Jill Herzig, and Marlene Kahan. With your support, my years in this dream career have also been key to making the dream of writing this book a reality. The lessons I've learned about women's health, about writing, and about myself while working at *Glamour* and *Redbook* have been absolutely invaluable.

And finally, a heartfelt thank-you to my editor, Denise Silvestro, to her assistant, Meredith Giordano, and everyone at Berkley Books. Thank you for believing in this project as much as I do.

foreword

During my eleven years working with women at the Renfrew Center's nationally renowned eating disorders treatment facilities, I've seen too many young women struggle with dieting, starving, and bingeing in secret, thinking they just have a willpower problem and aren't "sick enough" to get the help that they need. And even when they do reach out, the fact is, there aren't as many resources out there for people dealing with binge eating as there are for those with anorexia or bulimia. Research indicates that binge eating is more common than other eating disorders like anorexia or bulimia—yet it is talked about the least. That's one reason why I am so excited to be a part of this book.

Sometimes you meet someone even for a brief moment and you know that they are here to do good on the planet. And you want to support them in their goodness and to be a part of that if even in a small way. That was my experience during my first conversation with Sunny.

I first "met" Sunny over the phone when she was looking for therapists to interview for this book. She was familiar with the Renfrew Center's reputation and wanted to talk to a clinician here—so the marketing department referred her to me. After hearing her story, I was immediately on board with this book and with her mission to help young women who, like herself at one time, struggle with binge eating. I was struck by her authenticity and courage in sharing her own story, her genuine desire to help others, and her positive perspective on life—that no matter how bad things get, there is always hope.

Even in our very first conversation she seemed like a light to me (and not just because of her name!), wanting to help girls out of the dark places they were in as a result of their eating disorder. Eating disorders and food obsession extinguish a person's passions and sense of who they are and what they are capable of doing in the world. But this book is about showing people that there is another way to live, both in their own bodies and in the world.

Sunny shares in a deeply personal way how her own binge eating disorder began in her early teens—a very common time for food and body issues to begin or worsen—and the steps she took over the next several years that led to triumph over disordered eating. She asked dozens of other women between the ages of sixteen and thirty to share their stories too, and they all openly and honestly describe their behaviors with food and the strategies they've used to get better. Their stories inspire and give hope that recovery from binge eating is possible.

This book is not meant *only* to comfort, inform, and inspire—Sunny has also partnered with top experts and researchers in the eating disorders field to make sure it also provides specific tools, exercises, and resources that will assist in the healing process.

Food: The Good Girl's Drug couldn't have come soon enough: The obsession with weight in this country seems to be making things worse, not better. Eating disorders of all kinds are on the rise, and those of us who treat them are seeing younger and younger people who despise their bodies and struggle with issues of food.

For young women who are stuck in an out-of-control cycle of bingeing and dieting, this book could be the beginning of a life free from body hate and food obsession.

Jennifer Nardozi, Psy.D.
National Training Manager, The Renfrew Center

part one:

understanding what's going on between you and food

Would Someone Please Explain Why I Can't Stop Eating?

I love to eat—always have, always will. As a kid, I was a VIP member of the Clean Plate Club. You didn't have to tell me to finish my spaghetti, my sandwich, or even my veggies. I'd chow down every last bit of whatever was put in front of me and usually ask for more. And you know what? There was nothing wrong with that. I was, as my parents used to say, "a good little eater" and a healthy little girl.

But in my early teens, eating went from something fun, yummy, and nourishing to something that made me absolutely miserable. My parents had started fighting a lot, and ultimately talking divorce. I was freaking out. My family had always been really solid—no matter what I was going through, I could count on the fact that I had a mother and father who loved and supported me. My mom didn't even work outside of the home, so I had someone there every day after school. Honestly, it was pretty idyllic: I remember a couple of friends asking me if my mom was kidding around when she sweetly offered them a slice of homemade pineapple cake. Uh, nope. That was my life. Until it wasn't.

In addition to all of the other stuff I was going through as a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old—getting my braces off, feeling awkward, being backstabbed by friends, falling in love for the first time—my parents split up, my dad moved to another town, my mom started working two jobs and started dating (ouch). That's when a really puzzling, frenzied pattern of eating started to emerge. I snuck food, stole food, hid food, obsessed about food, loved food, hated food, hated myself. I would shove more food into my belly than I would've thought was humanly possible.

What I call my first official binge happened in the ninth grade. Mom and Dad were yelling at each other one night, and I escaped outside and dragged a blanket with me, heading for the roof of our German shepherd's doghouse so I wouldn't have to listen to it. Before I scooted out the door, I grabbed a spoon and a can of frozen orange juice concentrate from the freezer. (I'd seen my dad eat it before, and it wasn't half bad, sort of like really sweet sorbet.) I perched on the roof of that doghouse and cried, scooping the syrupy stuff into my mouth until the can was almost empty. I was in so much pain—even now, the memory of it brings a lump into my throat and a buzzy feeling in the pit of my stomach. But the sweetness of the juice and the mechanical action of moving the spoon up to my mouth over and over again seemed to numb my feelings.

I learned how to binge that night. I didn't know that's what it was called, all I knew was that it distracted me from my fear, hurt, and anger at what was going on in my family. So the next time I was hurting, I binged again. My mom was at one of her jobs (or maybe on a date?) and I invited my boyfriend over... to break up with him. Things had felt off for a couple of weeks and I finally realized I just wasn't that into him anymore. But after he left, I was feeling sad, lonely, and guilty for hurting such a sweet (and cute) guy. So what do you think I did? I ordered two small pizzas and ate them—alby myself. Then I hid the cardboard evidence deep in the outdoor garbage can. I woke up the next morning with puffy eyes and heartburn, feeling guilty, fat, and disgusting.

As much as I hated what I was doing with food, I couldn't stop. Soon I was sneaking into the kitchen almost every night, praying my mom wouldn't hear the wooden floors creak as I tiptoed past her bedroom door. I'd stand at the counter and eat three, four, five pieces of bread with butter, or pour maple syrup into peanut butter and eat it straight out of the jar. If there were cookies, ice cream, or crackers, I'd down those; if we had chips, I'd microwave a huge plate of them with shredded cheddar

cheese on top for makeshift nachos.

The face-stuffing didn't just happen at home: When I baby-sat my neighbors' kids or cleaned their houses for extra cash, I spent half the time rifling through their cupboards for Little Debbie snacks and potato chips. I rarely, if ever, ate anything at school, but I did have a close friend who became sort of "binge buddy." We'd go up to this Mexican place in our town called Rosa Maria's that was famous for its huge burritos—we'd each get one and go back to her room to devour them. Then we'd watch movies or play video games until we felt human again.

My crazy-fast teenage metabolism kept me slim for a while, but I eventually started putting on pounds. I slowly grew out of my jeans, size by size, and I hated myself for it. Though nowhere near it (yet), I thought I was fat. And "fat" to me meant disgusting, ugly, and weak. I started wearing big, baggy sweaters or sweatshirts over leggings to hide what I thought was an unacceptably big body, and I wore my long hair down all of the time to cover even more of myself. One Sunday afternoon, sobbing, I threw a pair of too-tight pants across my bedroom and screamed that I refused to wear anything larger. My mom stepped in and said she'd help—and asked a pharmacist friend to get me some diet pills. So there I was at fifteen years old, five six and probably 125 pounds, taking the prescription diet drug Tenuate. I felt shaky, nervous, and dry-mouthed, and I remember hoping my new boyfriend wouldn't notice my bad breath or pill-induced paranoia. It's obvious to my mother now that providing diet pills to her teenage daughter wasn't a smart or healthy thing for her to do. But at the time, she believed she was helping. She had very little understanding of eating disorders at all, had never heard of "emotional overeating" or binge eating, and saw me in great pain about putting on weight. She also had her own very deep-seated beliefs about the importance of being thin, and those likely played into it too. I'll talk a little more about that in Chapter 3 when we discuss how our family members' body image and dieting issues can affect our own.

While the diet pills worked during the day, they didn't keep me from eating at night—or even sometimes during the afternoons when I was home alone. My junior year of high school, I was selling candy bars for a school fund-raiser. One day after school, I ate one. Then two. Then three. Then four. I couldn't stop. I ate half a dozen candy bars that afternoon, and then spent the evening trying to make myself throw them up until my eyes were red and I was drooling into the toilet. But it didn't work. I couldn't get rid of the food, and I couldn't stop eating. Over the course of the two-month fund-raiser I'd downed at least forty dollars' worth of candy. At fifty cents apiece, that was eighty bars. *Eighty bars.*

My life became a cycle of out-of-control bingeing, guilt, dieting, and total self-hate that lasted all the way through my midtwenties. I thought about food, weight, and my body constantly: What should I eat? What shouldn't I eat? When can I eat again? How can I sneak this food into my room without my roommate noticing? Why am I so fat and ugly? Why can't I just STOP EATING? I felt like I was going insane. I didn't know it at the time, but I had an eating disorder. It wasn't anorexia (obviously) it wasn't bulimia (since I didn't make myself throw up after I ate); it was binge eating disorder (BED). I had no idea there even was such a thing, or that anyone else in the entire world ate this way. I just thought I was a pig and a freak.

What Is Binge Eating Disorder, and Do I Have It?

The official definition of binge eating disorder (BED) is evolving, but the National Eating Disorders Association (nationaleatingdisorders.org) describes it as recurrent binge eating without the regular use of compensatory measures—such as vomiting, excessive exercise, or using laxatives—to counter the binges. Some symptoms include:

- Frequent episodes of eating large quantities of food in relatively short periods of time

- Feeling out of control over eating behavior
- Feeling ashamed or disgusted by the behavior
- Eating rapidly
- Eating in secret
- Eating until uncomfortably full

Researchers estimate that 2 to 5 percent of Americans have binge eating disorder. It's more common than anorexia and bulimia combined, but it's not talked about as much. *

Of course, not everyone who overeats has binge eating disorder. Experts now recognize that there's a disordered eating spectrum, and that many people who have weird relationships with food move around on that spectrum throughout their lives, sometimes undereating, sometimes overeating, sometimes throwing up or using laxatives or diet pills. There's even a diagnosis called "eating disorder not otherwise specified" (EDNOS) that includes people who have symptoms of a few or even all of the other disorders.

"Most of the clients I see don't only use one behavior," said Jennifer Nardozi, Psy.D., national training manager of The Renfrew Center eating disorder treatment clinics. "Throughout their lives, they engage in lots of things: dieting, overexercising, taking diet pills, bingeing. I find that even when people are mostly emotional eaters or bingers, they also diet or restrict. They're often not eating for hours and hours and then the bingeing occurs."

Twenty-five-year-old Razieh told me that she went from one extreme to the other. "My story with eating disorders started when I was nineteen. I was anorexic and an overexerciser for about a year and a half. Then I think my body just gave out one day and I reached for a granola bar that, at the time, was not on my structured 'eating plan.' Well, let's just say that one granola bar turned into about two hours of bingeing in the kitchen. From then on, my life revolved around eating—bingeing alone—and working out to make up for it." Eighteen-year-old Kendra used to binge and purge like a bulimic, but stopped throwing up when she read about some of the scary possible health effects of eating disorder like infertility. "I quit purging, but unfortunately the bingeing part was more difficult to kick," she said.

What Eating Disorders Can Do to Your Body

Bingeing can cause chronic heartburn, bloating, diarrhea, and constipation, and cause lasting damage to your intestinal tract and stomach. Becoming obese from bingeing can increase your risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, infertility, diabetes, heart attack, stroke, and certain cancers, including breast cancer.

Vomiting can cause irreversible yellowing and erosion of the teeth or tooth loss, harm the stomach and throat, and lead to severe dehydration, seizures, heart attack, and potentially deadly electrolyte imbalances.

Taking laxatives can cause severe dehydration and even cause some women's digestive systems to become so dependent on the drugs that they no longer work properly on their own.

Starving can disrupt metabolism so that the body no longer burns calories at a normal rate, and may cause the body to leach nutrients from its own muscle and bone. Becoming very underweight

can lead to infertility, heart failure, and even death.

Diet pills can cause racing heart beat, anxiety, bad breath, mood swings, dehydration, fainting, and can dangerously interact with some prescription medications like antidepressants.

Of course, an eating-disordered person isn't necessarily doomed to any of these fates. The earlier she gets help and starts treating her body more gently, and nourishing it—rather than punishing it—with food, the fewer lasting effects she'll have. *

What Exactly Is a “Binge,” Anyway?

Eating disorder professionals define a binge as eating a large amount of food in a short period of time and experiencing a feeling of being out of control while doing it. In reality though, bingeing means different things to different people—and binges can change throughout your life as you start to recover from your eating issues, said clinical psychologist Cynthia Bulik, Ph.D., director of the University of North Carolina eating disorders program. “We researchers spend hours figuring out what qualifies as a binge—and frankly I am not convinced that it’s a great way to spend our time. At some point it becomes splitting hairs,” she said. “The key issue is if it causes distress to the individual and/or interferes with their life in any way. That could mean not going out with friends to eat, avoiding social situations in which there is food, choosing to stay at home with your binge foods over going to work. In fact, there is also something we call ‘subjective’ binges, where the amount of food isn’t actually that large, but the person still feels out of control. Someone might eat one chocolate chip cookie and feel like she is completely out of control—she transgressed her boundary for what was okay and feels like she binged.”

My senior year in college, I was editor in chief of the daily campus newspaper and would often work until after midnight at the offices without eating dinner. On the way home, I’d pull into the Jack in the Box drive-through and order what might not have been an absolutely *insane* amount of food, but was certainly more than a healthy young woman needed. The sourdough Jack cheeseburger alone would’ve been enough to feed my body’s actual hunger; the large order of deep-fried jalapeño poppers with a side of ranch dressing and the slice of cheesecake I used to feed my emotional hunger. “When soothing anxiety, I reach for sugar and carbs,” Razieh told me. “Anything that I have been staring at all week, convincing myself not to eat, is usually the first thing I grab. But often it’s the large variety of foods that defines my binges now. The thought of eating two slices of pizza for lunch will be too overwhelming, so I try to just have a couple of snacks instead. But that’s not satisfying, so it leads to seven or eight small snacks, like a handful of nuts, a chocolate bar, a piece of bread, a yogurt, some popcorn and a granola bar—ultimately resulting in more calories than the two slices of pizza. It’s so mental!”

A binge is defined as eating a large amount of food in a short period of time, and experiencing a feeling of being out of control while doing it.

My bingeing was at its worst in my early twenties. I was divorced (yes, divorced! I had a very brief marriage from twenty-one to twenty-three), depressed, lonely, and scared, and I relied on food to soothe myself. Two of my favorite binge foods during that time of my life were peanut butter M&M’s and miniature Reese’s peanut butter cups. I’d buy a big one-pound “family size” bag of one of those, and then go home, shut myself up in my room safe from the prying eyes of my roommates, and just eat. I’d shove the candy in my mouth as fast as possible, chewing like a machine, until I felt sick. A few times I remember having to lie facedown on my bed with a pillow under my belly to soothe the pain. Sometimes, after my stomach felt better, I’d start eating again.

No one could call that behavior anything but disordered. But often bingeing and emotional eating are more subtle than that. “My binges are the result of stress, usually with school, but sometimes with family, too,” said Trish, a twenty-three-year-old law student. “Law school is tough, and I find myself in pressure overloads more often than not, which leads me to binge unconsciously. I say ‘unconsciously’ because I am so focused on my schoolwork and applying for internships and moot

court teams that I don't realize how much I actually eat, or what I'm putting in my mouth. I order Chinese food or sushi or pizza and I sit at my kitchen table with three hundred pages of criminal law to read, and I just put food into my mouth without so much as looking at it until I'm full. Then, once realize that I just ate a whole container of General Tso's, I have my postbinge guilt trip. All of my focus comes off of my work and onto my flaws. I think about how I have no self-control, how I'm obese, and I look down at my belly in disgust and let my thoughts abuse me."

How Many People Binge Eat?

There are literally millions of us out there who struggle with emotional overeating and bingeing. It's estimated that 3.5 percent of women and 2 percent of men in the United States have binge eating disorder. Recent research has shown that binge eating is more common than anorexia and bulimia combined, and that kids as young as six years old can have problems with it. But bingeing isn't talked about as much as anorexia and bulimia, and that means there aren't nearly enough resources for those who need help, said Dr. Nardozzi.

I've often wondered why the discussion of binge eating is so much more muted than other disorders. It could be because it's simply not as—for lack of a better word—"glamorous" as the diseases that make people skinny. Just think about it: Tabloid covers explode with exclamation points and praise when a pop star "gets her bikini body back" and some of our most celebrated young female celebs are so skinny they look a little sick. Writers and bloggers titter about how stars look anorexic, but then go on to talk about how fashionable and cool they are. "There's still a negative stigma attached to overeating," said Charles Sophy, F.A.C.N., a psychiatrist in Beverly Hills who treats many young women with disordered eating, including some in the entertainment industry. "This is especially true for women, where it is oftentimes viewed as being unfeminine. But being skinny, even too skinny, can be associated with determination or what someone may have to sacrifice in order to pursue a certain career path. Those superskinny people seem to have it all together, while being overweight can be associated with what people think of as a lack of discipline or laziness, and a general lack of control. Many times that's untrue, just like the idea that skinny people have it all together."

There are literally millions of us out there who struggle with emotional overeating and bingeing. It's estimated that 3.5 percent of women and 2 percent of men in the United States have binge eating disorder.

Still, the message we girls and women get is all too clear: Being skinny—even if you have to starve or throw up to get that way—is pretty and glamorous; eating too much and getting fat is ugly and unacceptable. Just ask twenty-year-old Amanda, who used to starve herself and even illegally bought ADHD meds from a guy in her dorm in order to suppress her appetite and slim down: "My freshman year of college, I started taking Adderall to curb my appetite, and I wouldn't eat for days. But I wasn't even worried about it. I just wanted to look good," she told me. "The only time I would eat would be when I didn't take a pill, and then I would binge on huge amounts of food. I knew something was wrong, but the sad thing is that I wasn't ashamed of my disordered eating habits until I started gaining weight. I liked not eating and how I looked; it was only when I started eating too much that I became ashamed and upset with myself."

Are All Bingers Overweight?

Not at all. This is a huge misperception that people have about emotional overeaters. I know people who have been reluctant to get help because they figure that if their body size is about right, their problem isn't "bad" enough to need fixing. "Believing your size is an indication of your mental or physical health is incorrect," said Dr. Nardozzi. "The extreme ends of eating disorders can lead to sizes that are way too small and too big. But what you really need to look at are your behaviors and your mind-set. Are you obsessing about food and your body? Is your mood affected by what you eat? Are you feeling bad about yourself for eating large amounts of food or are you restrictive with your eating after indulging? I've heard women at the Renfrew Center say, 'Oh God, I don't deserve to be here' because they don't think their bodies are sick enough. But are you having more days than not that you're feeling really awful about yourself and doing unhealthy behaviors? That's a better indicator of whether you have an eating problem than your weight alone."

When I was writing this book, I rented a desk in a little communal office space for writers in my neighborhood in Brooklyn so that I'd have a quiet place to work on the weekends. One day I was chatting with an older lady who asked what my project was about. When I said I was writing a book for girls who binge eat, based partly on my own experience with binge eating disorder, she said, "Wow, really? You don't look like you binge." My reply? "I'm recovered now. But it's funny you had that reaction: Not all overeaters are overweight, and one reason I'm writing the book is because there are so many misperceptions about people like us."

I was significantly overweight at one time, though. When I was twenty-two years old, during my short marriage while I was in college, I weighed 225 pounds and was, according to body mass index charts, clinically obese. Some emotional overeaters are overweight or obese from the time they're children, but others yo-yo up and down, stay in a pretty normal range, or even become underweight because of things like overexercising or dieting. Kendra said she knows logically that her weight is normal, but she doesn't feel like it. "I weigh 123 pounds and I'm five six, so technically I'm 'healthy' but I don't feel healthy," she told me. "I don't feel healthy unless I see definition in my abs and weigh 112." (At 112 pounds, by the way, Kendra would be clinically underweight; just a few pounds from the official definition of anorexic.) Twenty-one-year-old Sarah, on the other hand, said she's always been on the larger side. "You could say that I am morbidly obese, but I just say that I'm really overweight," she explained. "I'm only five two and weigh about 260 pounds. I'm not comfortable in my body and always wear really baggy clothes."

Weight fluctuations are incredibly common among overeaters. Amanda weighed just one hundred pounds after severely restricting herself in high school and her early college years—but she quickly put on forty pounds in one year once she started bingeing again. I've yo-yo'd, too. As an adult, I have been as slim as a size ten and as large as a size twenty. My weight is stable now and naturally fluctuates between five and ten pounds, depending on how active I've been and where I am in my menstrual cycle. The moral of these stories? Emotional overeaters come in all shapes and sizes.

Does Food Make You Miserable?

If you're reading this book, chances are there's something a little off about your relationship with food. Maybe you think about food all day long: what to eat, what not to eat, when you can eat, how much you can eat, how you can get exactly what you want to eat, if you should eat at all. Maybe you eat a lot of food, more than you think any normal person could possibly fit in their belly. Maybe you hide food under your bed, in your car, or in your desk drawer, because you feel panicky when you don't have snacks around—or because you don't want your roommate, parents, or significant other to know what you really eat, or how much of it. Maybe you consume whole boxes of cereal, pints of ice cream, or jars of peanut butter, and then stuff the containers deep in the trash so no one will know it was you who finished them off. Maybe you only ever eat when you're alone because you can't stand the thought of someone watching you do something so “shameful.” Maybe you've taken food out of the garbage and eaten it, or eaten something that was burned or still frozen because you were desperate for it. Maybe you steal food from your family, roommates, coworkers, or even from the store. Maybe you make up excuses not to hang out with people so that you can go home and be alone with food. Maybe you've tried to make yourself throw up after a really big binge, or fasted to make up for it and promised yourself you'd never do it again.

Eating for psychological reasons, rather than from hunger, is called many things—binge eating disorder, EDNOS, emotional overeating, compulsive eating, binge eating, loss-of-control eating, food addiction, stress eating. And it can have many variations and levels of severity. You may find that you relate to one of these terms better than others, and I'll be telling the stories of girls and women who identify themselves in all of these different ways. For consistency's sake, I'm going to use the terms *binge eating* and *emotional overeating* in this book.

Whether you meet the criteria for an official eating disorder diagnosis or not, if your overeating and food obsession is causing you pain and problems in your life, you deserve to get better. Are you ready to start? Let's get to it!

Your Turn:

At the end of each chapter, I'll give you a few things to think about and write on, so grab some paper or a journal. These first three questions are meant to help you put down, in black and white, the things about your relationship with food that you may have been too afraid, or too ashamed, to admit before now. Know that whatever you write, you are not alone.

1. What is your weight and body history? Did you yo-yo like Amanda and I did? Are you slim but don't feel that way like Kendra, or do you struggle with being overweight or obese like Sarah?
2. Did you relate to any of the eating disorder descriptions in this chapter such as EDNOS or BED? How or why?
3. Do you think that you are an emotional overeater or binge eater? What terms would you use to describe your issues with food?

Sound Familiar? A Few Things Emotional Overeaters Have in Common

I remember walking into my first support group for overeaters when I was twenty-nine years old. I looked around at the people in the room and thought, *Wait... what? These women binge eat?* I don't know exactly what I was expecting, but what I found were girls of all ages, all cultures, and all sizes, some of whom were so put together and pretty that if I'd seen them on the street I would've been jealous!

I thought they were all so different from me, but sure enough, as these women raised their hands one by one and shared their stories, I was surprised to discover that I related to each and every one of them. Sure, the details were different, but our craziness about food and our bodies—and the way our brains worked and processed emotions like fear and anger—were shockingly similar. I learned two lessons that night that I will never ever forget: (1) You can't compare the way you feel on the inside the way someone appears on the outside, and (2) No matter how different we may be as individuals, we emotional overeaters have a lot in common. As you read the things the girls in this chapter are talking about, keep this question in the back of your mind: Have you ever done, said, or thought anything like this?

Eating in Secret

It's almost universal: Every woman I've met at my support groups or talked to through HealthyGirl.org, my website for young women who emotionally overeat, has tried to keep the worst of their bingeing hidden from other people. That means bingeing in the middle of the night when our parents, roommates, or significant others are asleep; hiding food in our bedrooms, cars, or desk drawers; lying about food that "disappears" from the fridge; sometimes even stealing food when there's no other way to satisfy that overwhelming urge to eat. We feel ashamed about our behavior and take great pains to try to hide it from our family and friends—even waitresses or the people who work behind the counter at drugstores. It's not just the type or amount of food that is embarrassing; it's the fact that we have lost control. What we're doing with food feels disgusting and crazy, so why in the heck would we want anyone to know? Many of us go to great lengths to make sure nobody ever does.

"For me bingeing is such a secretive behavior, something I do in private that is my dirty little secret," Jenn, a twenty-one-year-old college student told me. "It's hard to do living at home since my eating habits are so scrutinized by my mother, but my recent binges all really have a few things in common: They take place in the afternoon or night, and no one else is around. If my parents are home I wait until they are in bed, which is usually by nine, and binge in the basement while I watch TV." Like Jenn, I used to binge after my mom had gone to bed. I always kept the lights off in the kitchen, and usually turned on the water in the sink so she'd think I was just getting a drink. She did catch me once or twice—I remember her calling out from her bedroom, "Sunny? What are you doing?" The shame and embarrassment were almost unbearable.

Sometimes I'd binge on stuff while standing in front of the open fridge, but when I was too freaked out about the possibility of my mom walking in, I'd grab cereal or crackers or whatever there was and hurry back to my room to eat it. The worst part of the deception would be waking up in the morning to the evidence: the crumbs, plates, bowls, or wrappers that littered the floor—sometimes even uneaten portions of food that I'd fallen asleep in the middle of chewing. I once woke up with half a piece of buttered bread next to my cheek on the pillow. As the realization of what I had done sank in, so would the self-hate and guilt.

Of course, we don't just binge in our kitchens or bedrooms. Some of us do it at work, school, even in our cars. "I do think at one point I had binge eating disorder," twenty-four-year-old Hillary told me. "I had always overeaten, but it got to a point in the last year or so when I knew it had spun out of control, when I would go out for a drive, order as much Taco Bell as possible, and then eat it in my car because I didn't want anybody to see." Dr. Bulik said that a lot of binge eaters do this very same thing. In fact, one of her fellow eating disorders researchers did a study to look at when and where people had the most "problematic eating episodes" and found that cars were one of the worst. I once downed twenty McDonald's Chicken McNuggets during a ride home after a disappointing trip to see a guy I had a crush on.

Another time, when I was nineteen, I binged in the parking lot of my diet doctor's office! I'd been seeing an expensive M.D. who had helped a friend of my mom's drop a bunch of weight with an all-protein diet, plus lots of horrible pills and weird bars. Part of the deal was that you had to go in once a week to be weighed and have your blood pressure taken. I was driving to the office for a weigh-in after about five weeks of deprivation on the diet when my hands just sort of steered me into a 7-Eleven parking lot. I felt like my mind just went blank, and kind of robotically, I walked in and bought a huge box of Dunkin' Sticks glazed donut bars. As soon as I got back to the car I ripped the package open

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