

When to say 'sometimes' and when to say 'never'

Written by vegan naturopath Robyn Chuter.

Conventional wisdom has it that 'a little of what you fancy does you good', and that 'everything in moderation' is the key to good health. If this approach is working well for you – if you easily maintain your ideal weight, [have a healthy relationship with food](#), and have no health problems – then great! Keep doing what you're doing. If not, read on :).

This week, I shared my thoughts about 'sometimes' and 'never' foods – based on both my personal experience, and over 20 years of working with thousands of clients who have various degrees of 'messed-upness' around food – with a client, whom I'll call Grace. She found the discussion enlightening and helpful. I hope you will too.

Let's start by dividing foods up into 3 categories. The first is *ad libitum* foods – that is, foods that you can and should eat as much as you like of, because they're flat-out healthy, and just about impossible to overeat. Think fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes. Ever tried overeating broccoli or boiled chick peas? How far did you get? I thought so.

The next category is *sometimes* foods. This category includes both plant-based foods such as dried fruit and nuts, which are wholesome but perilously easy to overeat, and not-so-wholesome foods such as animal products (unless of course you're vegan, in which case they're a 'never' food) and 'vegan junk food'.

And finally, we have our *never* foods. These are the foods that really ought not to ever pass your lips, for the sake of your physical and/or mental health.

The tricky question is, how do we distinguish between a 'sometimes' and a 'never' food?

As I explained to Grace, a 'sometimes' food is one that you *know* you can consume, every now and again, with complete safety – that is, it won't make you feel unwell, and after you've finished it, you don't crave it, and you don't think about it at all until the next occasion that you have it. And when I say *occasion*, I mean 'occasion'. An occasion is a special event, like a birthday, Christmas, or anniversary. If you're eating a particular food 4 times a week, that's not 'occasional' consumption!

For both Grace and I, alcohol is very much a 'sometimes' item. As I told Grace, once a year I share a half-bottle of Macquariedale Estate dessert wine with my husband, on our wedding anniversary. It's the one wine that doesn't give me a headache within minutes of the first sip, so I enjoy it... and then forget all about it until the next anniversary.

Grace drinks champagne at weddings, but other apart from that, has no interest in alcohol. So for both of us, placing alcohol in the 'sometimes' category is a no-brainer.

What about the 'never' foods? For me, that *used* to be anything sweet and gooey – chocolate mud cake, cheesecake, custard tarts – anything with that magic combination of sugar and fat would flip my obsession switch. One bite was never enough. If someone in my family brought home chocolate mud cake, it would sing to me from the fridge. I'd hear it serenading me at night while I lay in bed. I couldn't stop myself from opening up the box and cutting another piece – just a tiny sliver, then another, then another, until it was all gone and I was faced with both the physical discomfort of a stomach full of sweet, fatty stodge, and an equally sickening feeling of shame at my abject lack of self-control.

But even when there was none left, I would keep thinking about

it. When could I get my hands on some more? Surely I could I just have one slice, and then put it out of my mind? Surely I could eat it 'in moderation'; after all, other people around me seemed to be able to do that.

The breakthrough moment came when I acknowledged to myself that there were some foods that I simply could not be moderate with. To make my life easier, I had to put them on the 'never' list.

This is not such a foreign idea. We don't tell smokers to 'smoke moderately'; we tell them to quit. If someone is an alcoholic, we don't tell them to cut down on their drinking. They need to *stop* drinking entirely, at least for a period of time; some former alcoholics are able to have the occasional drink after they've gone through recovery, while others find out the hard way that even one sip of alcohol will invariably lead to complete relapse.

You might have already put certain foods on your 'never' list; for example flesh foods, if you're vegetarian, or all animal products, if you're vegan. As social psychologist Melanie Joy [points out](#), entire cultures put certain foods on their 'never' list; for example, dog meat in Western cultures, and pork amongst Muslims and Jews.

I have a number of Jewish clients who grew up in secular families, but in their teens decided to become 'religious Jews' – that is, to follow Jewish laws. One element of becoming religious was keeping kosher. The interesting thing is, that not one of the people I've spoken to who did this, ever experienced any difficulty in letting go of non-kosher foods – even foods that had been favourites before – once they *made the decision* to keep kosher.

Most of the vegans I see report the same phenomenon. There's an identity shift that happens once you declare, to yourself and others, "I don't eat that", whether the 'that' is non-

kosher foods, meat or chocolate mud cake. As Grace mused, other people tend not to argue with you (“Go on, just have one, I made it just for you!”) when you simply say “I don’t eat that”, probably because at some level they register that ‘not eating that’ is part of your identity, and non-negotiable.

As our discussion progressed, Grace realised that potato chips needed to become a ‘never’ food for her. She had already decided to never bring them home, but had given herself permission to eat them when at other people’s houses. Problem was, once she had one, she couldn’t stop eating them, and bingeing on chips tended to derail her attempts to eat more healthfully overall. That’s hardly Grace’s fault; as investigative journalist Michael Moss pointed out in his disturbingly brilliant book [Sugar Salt Fat](#), Big Food invests Big Money into developing products that are so addictive, once you have one bite you can’t put them down.

But people do vary in their susceptibility to the addictive pull of processed foods, both for genetic (and possibly epigenetic) reasons and because of varying experiences with food during childhood, and different foods are ‘binge triggers’ for different people. I’ve never had much of a ‘thing’ for chips, so they don’t need to go on my ‘never’ list; it just doesn’t occur to me to eat them in the first place.

Placing all those gooey sweet treats on my ‘never’ list, on the other hand, completely liberated me from the endless, energy-draining back-and-forth in my head about whether, and when, and with whom, and how often, and how much I could eat those foods. Once I became a person who doesn’t eat ‘that’, I reclaimed all the energy that had been tied up in that conflict... and put it to much better use!

So how do you know if a food needs to go on *your* ‘never’ list? I simply ask clients to tell me which foods they crave, and

then ask them

“If I were to tell you that you can never have that food again in your whole life, how would you feel?”

If they experience a visceral sensation that’s strikingly similar to the experience of grief – that ‘gutted’ feeling you get when someone you love dies or leaves your life – I know we’ve found a ‘never’ food. I mean, if you told me I could never eat broccoli again I would feel bummed, because I like broccoli, but I wouldn’t feel *bereft*. There are other vegetables in the world, after all!

I use Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) and Matrix Reimprinting to work through that grief and unpack the early-life experiences that forge our deep emotional attachments to certain foods, which helps bring my clients to the point of being able to move those particular foods onto their ‘never’ list with no ‘maybes’ and no regrets.

And the interesting is, most of them end up reporting the same experience as me: down the track from when I made that decision, I no longer have any interest in those foods. They don’t actually look like *food* to me anymore. So there’s no sense of missing out, or yearning for a lost pleasure. My life is better – happier, richer and fuller – for being a person who doesn’t eat ‘that’.