Tackling Avoided Foods

Foods you Avoid

If you are experiencing an eating disorder it is likely that you feel uncomfortable or anxious about eating certain foods. You might worry that these foods will make you gain weight or you might fear losing control whilst eating them. You may have developed strict rules about eating particular foods or even avoid some foods altogether.

The Problems with Strict Food 'Rules'

Strict rules about food and eating can be problematic as they may prevent people from obtaining a variety of essential nutrients that can only be acquired by eating a wide range of foods. In addition, since socialising often revolves around food, holding such strict rules about your eating can negatively impact your ability to maintain relationships and engage in a relaxed and rewarding social life. Furthermore, often when you deny yourself something you increase your preoccupation with and desire for it. "Breaking" a rigid food rule can sometimes result in binge eating behaviours because rather than eating a regular portion of the forbidden food, you may eat a large amount or more than you had planned. Alternatively, your disappointment about breaking a food rule may prompt a binge, particularly if you think to yourself something like "I've blown it now, I might as well eat as much as I want".

For these reasons, we want to help you overcome your fear of certain foods and help you practise eating them as part of your normal life. We are going to help you set up some experiments to challenge your worries about eating these foods.

What are my Food Rules?

The first step to loosening food rules is to identify the foods that you avoid. To do this, fill out the columns in the table over the page with foods you avoid *a little, a lot* and *completely*. Sometimes people have avoided certain foods for such a long time that they don't realise how much they have limited the range of food they eat. We recommend walking around a supermarket imagining yourself eating the foods on the shelves. If you have any anxiety or worry about eating a food, place it on the list. **Rate the level of anxiety (0-10 scale).** Don't worry about ones you don't like the taste of, however, remember that sometimes people convince themselves that they don't like the taste of certain foods that they are actually afraid to eat or haven't allowed themselves to eat in a long time.

Once you have identified the foods you avoid you can begin to check out the reasons why you avoid them and whether it makes sense or is helpful to continue to do so.

Experimenting with Avoided Foods

Strict food rules are often based on assumptions or predictions rather than facts. To better understand your eating disorder and loosen your food rules it can help to test out your predictions about your avoided foods.

Follow the steps below to test your predictions about the foods you avoid.

1. Choose a food from the left hand column of the list overleaf – one rated about 3-4 out of 10

*Food:*_____ *Rating:* __/10

2. What are you afraid will happen if you eat this food?

_____

_____

3. How will you test this prediction?
Plan how you will do this:

*When:*_____

Where: _____

What do you need to do? _____

4. Record your subjective level of distress before, during and after the experiment (rate 0-10):

Before: _____ *Rating:* ___/10

During: _____ *Rating:* ___/10

After: _____ *Rating:* ___/10

5. What actually happened (when you tested the prediction)?

_____

_____

_____

6. What does this mean for your new, balanced view about this food?

_____

_____

_____

You're now ready to move onto other foods on the list.

Remember the key is to break things down into manageable steps. Begin with foods that you avoid a little and work your way up to foods that you avoid a lot . If a particular food is very challenging, you may need to break this into smaller steps. E.g., if a regular sized chocolate bar is 10/10 you may need to start by eating a funsize bar and then work up to the regular bar.

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Foods I avoid *a little*		Foods I avoid *a lot*		Foods I avoid *completely*	
e.g. Avocado (in salad)	5	e.g. Peanut butter (on toast)	7	e.g. Chocolate	10
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