

Food Rules

Most people with eating disorders have developed what I refer to as “food rules”. Even if you have not written them down, spoken them out loud, or considered them rules, you likely hold certain beliefs about what you should or should not do with food. Some clients immediately recognize what I mean when I ask about their food rules, but others need examples and time to think about what rules they are actually following. For example, one client might have a rule about not eating anything after 9 p.m., another might not eating dessert, or someone else might purge anything considered “fattening”.

In addition to rules directly related to food, I compiled a list of beliefs my clients had reported to me over the years. It seemed that most people held at least some of these beliefs and were trying to live by them even though they had never formally written them down or told anybody. All the rules are directly about food or weight. I called this list “The Thin Commandments” and first published it in my book, [Your Dieting Daughter](#).

The Thin Commandments

1. If you aren't thin you aren't attractive.
2. Being thin is more important than being healthy, more important than anything
3. You must buy clothes, cut your hair, take laxatives, starve yourself, and do anything to make yourself look thinner.
4. Thou shall “earn” all food and shall not eat without feeling guilty.
5. Thou shall not eat fattening food without punishing oneself afterwards.

6. Thou shall count calories and fat and restrict intake accordingly.
7. What the scale says is the most important thing.
8. Losing weight is good/gaining weight is bad.
9. You can't trust what other people say about your weight.
10. Being thin and not eating are signs of true will power and success.

The reason clients develop food rules or other rules regarding weight is to provide them with a way of “keeping themselves in line.” Rules can give a sense of control and assurance that nothing bad or unexpected will happen. Food rules are objective, measurable, and they limit choice, making the person feel “safer” when tempted or anxious around food. It is easy to believe these rules will alleviate the mistrust that clients feel about their appetite, desires, and decisions. If a people believe they cannot trust themselves or their body, it makes sense they would develop rules whether consciously or not to help them maintain control.

When working with clients it is important to help them write down and become conscious of their food rules. Then the process of breaking down the faulty reasoning of these rules can begin.

Carolyn Costin