

# Food Mantras & Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy

So many of us have been conditioned to think of foods as ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ ‘healthy’ or ‘junk’ food. And all too often, we transfer those same judgments onto *ourselves*—labeling ourselves as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ based on what we eat. Ultimately, this only continues the cycle of stressing about food and health, and then using food to cope with our stress.

When we label a cookie ‘bad’ automatically, we create tension, anxiety, and guilt—especially if we want to eat it or we’ve just eaten it (or several). Then, that anxiety and guilt can fuel further unhelpful behaviors, like overeating, food restriction, or trying to compensate with exercise.

The *thought* that the cookie is ‘bad’ produces *feelings* of anxiety and guilt, which lead to *behaviors* like overeating or restricting. **Our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all linked—blending together and affecting one another.**

But luckily, because of this interconnectedness, making changes in one of these areas affects the others. **By changing our thoughts about food, we can change our feelings and behaviors around food.** This plays a role in how we shift our relationships with food, and this is also the essence of **CBT: cognitive-behavioral therapy.**

CBT is considered the [gold standard](#) for treating anxiety, and it has proven effective in treating a [range of conditions](#)—from depression to substance abuse and beyond. At its core, CBT is a brain training method, resulting in [actual structural changes to the brain](#). Best of all, it’s an approach that is safe for individuals, accessible to anyone, and available at any time.

Using a CBT approach, we can practice replacing *unhelpful thoughts* about food with more *adaptive thoughts*. And as our thoughts change, our *feelings* and *behaviors* change, too. **With repeated practice over time, we’re actually rewiring our brains to develop new healthy habits!**

So, instead of labeling the cookie ‘bad’ or ‘junk’ food, what would it be like to simply ask yourself: “*Do I feel like eating a cookie right now?*” What would it be like to give yourself permission to eat the cookie and enjoy it? What would it be like to be present and savor every bite, and then feel good after eating a treat that you really love?

As you notice your own learned food labels, practice responding to these thoughts in new ways. How can you challenge that food label and take the morality out of food? How can you respond to yourself with compassion?

Check out the Food Mantras exploration on the next page; they may help replace old judgments as you journey toward a healthier relationship with food!



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Below, I've shared some food mantras that I've found helpful in shifting my relationship with food, but I encourage you to come up with your own ideas that resonate with you. The key is to really practice using these mantras instead of those old, unhelpful judgments. Remember, with time and repetition, you're actually rewiring your brain to think about food (and yourself) differently!

## FOOD MANTRAS:

*"I give myself permission to eat and enjoy this."*

*"I can eat this without judgment."*

*"Food isn't 'good' or 'bad'—it just is."*

*"I am not what I eat."*

*"What I eat doesn't determine my worth."*

*"I'm an adult and I can eat what I want, when I want."*

*"I'm an adult and I can say 'no' to food whenever I want."*

*"This is such a treat, I'm so grateful that I get to enjoy it!"*

*"This is such a treat, I'm just not hungry right now."*

*"This is one of my favorite foods, I'm so glad that I get to eat it!"*

*"This is one of my favorite foods, and I don't feel like eating any right now."*

*"I want to eat this, I'm allowed to eat this, and I will enjoy every bite."*

*"I'm not hungry right now, but I may have some later."*

*"I'm allowed to eat this, I just don't want to eat this right now."*

*"When I take the morality out of food, it's just food."*

*"It's just food—I don't need to stress."*

Brainstorm a few mantras that might help shift your thoughts—which ultimately will impact your feelings and behavior—around food! Coming up with these on your own is powerful because you can draw from your own struggles and experience to best serve your needs.

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