

How “Diet” Became the Dirtiest Word in Wellness

It's suddenly cool to be pro doughnuts and anti diets, but is social media cooking up another confusing message about weight loss and wellbeing? *WH* investigates

By Penny Carroll





A funny thing has happened on Instagram lately. Mouth-watering images of doughnuts, piled high and dripping with icing or artfully composed on a pastel background, have started crowding out the green smoothies and acai bowls that previously populated our feeds. You know the ones: they come with rousing advice to eat the darn thing and not give a damn. And, even more puzzling: you may spot them in the same accounts that once spruiked kale salads and plant-based brownies.

It's wellness, but not as you know it. This is the anti-diet movement, a liberating take on health that encourages its followers to stop demonising food and idealising weight loss. It might feel like a revolution but it's not really new. Anti-diet culture, informed largely by radical feminism and the fat-acceptance movement of the '70s, has been around for decades. But it's recently hit the big time thanks to the likes of actress and activist Jameela Jamil's iWeigh Instagram account (where you're invited to measure your worth in personal values and achievements rather than kilos) and UK-based nutritionist Laura Thomas, who in 2018 published a book called *Just Eat It*, emblazoned with the unofficial emblem of the anti-diet movement, a pink-glazed doughnut.

For anyone who's suffered through the lemon detox, the Atkins diet or even a clean-eating 'lifestyle', it's a tantalising idea. Here is permission to eat the foods we crave, without a side serve of guilt. Diets, once considered the gateway to glowing health and a bangin' bod, are being called out for

overpromising and underdelivering, and leaving a legacy of physical and mental health problems to boot. Like sugar and gluten before it, diet is now a four-letter word.

"The anti-diet movement is about not being a victim of diet culture anymore," explains dietitian Lyndi Cohen, one of Australia's most outspoken anti-diet advocates. "I think in many ways it's a female fight because women are so often targeted by the diet industry. Women especially end up tying their self-worth to how they look, and the diet industry teaches us that that's what matters most."

This message is so pervasive that author and vulnerability researcher Brené Brown ranks body image and appearance as the number one shame trigger for women. And that makes weight loss and dieting a complex beast for many of us. "We get so hung up on dieting because we believe that getting a thinner body will make us happy," says psychologist Glenn Mackintosh, founder of Weight Management Psychology and author of *Thinsanity: 7 Steps to Transform Your Mindset and Say Goodbye to Dieting Forever* (Hachette, \$29.99). "But if you talk to a lot of people in thin bodies, they're not happy because the body image stuff is in your mind."

Do or donut

Ask an anti-dieter and they'll tell you that the solution is to do away with diets altogether. "I don't think there's a place for the traditional diet anymore," says Cohen, "because research shows us that a healthy lifestyle that is free from restrictions and absolutes is more effective."

Clinical nutritionist Jessica Sepel, who has a program, app and books focused on what she calls "un-dieting", agrees. "Diets work for a little while, until they don't," she says. "They're unsustainable. Giving up dieting is the beginning of finding freedom with food and your body."

But not all health experts are ready to bin diets for good. Take British-born, Sydney-based PT James Smith. The author of the upcoming *Not a Diet Book* (HarperCollins, \$32.99), Smith's social media posts take sharp aim at trends like plant-based eating, the keto diet and intermittent fasting. He's also known for his polarising weight-loss mantra, "calorie fucking deficit". "I personally think the term 'dieting' has been largely misconstrued due to the vast and growing amount of charlatans selling their 'special' diet to the masses, proclaiming you need a certain tea, fasting protocol or workout to lose fat," he says. "However, in my opinion, we can't lose sight of what a traditional weight-loss diet is. It is a period of sensible restriction. That's it. After we enjoy lavish holidays, we come home to ... more sensible spending [and] no one is having an issue with that, are they?"

The anti-diet message serves a purpose for those battling disordered eating, acknowledges Smith, but reckons "it has the potential to leave a large amount of people feeling a bit lost". He explains, "I've worked with thousands of clients and helped them lose fat, and to them and to myself, counting calories is an exercise of liberation [rather] than obsession."

Dieting isn't always problematic for everyone, admits Mackintosh, adding that in our appearance-obsessed



Weigh
it up

185K
the number of posts
on Instagram tagged
#antidiet

50

The percentage of
Australian women
who say they want to
lose weight, despite
being in the healthy
BMI range.

SOURCE: ROY MORGAN



Check out our podcast, *Uninterrupted*, for chats with Lyndi Cohen, Jessica Sepel, Dr Nikki Stamp (coming soon!) and other inspiring voices in the wellbeing world.



world, it's common to want to lose weight sometimes, and expecting people to simply banish those thoughts is unrealistic. "We do see that in our body-positive communities, that people end up feeling ashamed for that very normal desire [to lose weight]," he says. "Having a little bit of focus [on weight] and recognising your weight can be important for wellbeing and health is fine. It's when it takes over that it starts to be a problem."

There is a real argument for weight loss for health, too, says surgeon Dr Nikki Stamp, author of *Pretty Unhealthy: Why our obsession with looking healthy is making us sick* (Murdoch Books, \$32.99). "It's really important to differentiate the 'bad' or fad diets from good nutrition or medically and/or dietetically supervised and prescribed diets. I do wonder if that is a place where anti-diet sentiment can be seen as going too far," she says. "While weight management is not necessarily appropriate for reasons like aesthetics, there are times where even small amounts of weight loss are important for health."

Mixed messages

Underpinning the anti-diet philosophy is intuitive eating, an approach that emphasises eating without rules or judgement and learning to listen to the body's natural hunger and fullness signals. For many cruising Instagram for wellness advice, though, the idea of eating mindfully might be overshadowed by the more appealing concept of eating a slice of cake for breakfast if you feel like it. "Diets don't work, so here, have a doughnut", the memes seem to say. Confused much?

It's one of the weak points of the anti-diet movement, acknowledges Mackintosh. "We've got people talking about the harms of dieting and what not to do, and now we have to step up and say, 'OK, well, here is a viable alternative,'" he says.

The problem is, the nature of Instagram – all pretty pictures and snackable content – makes it easy for the nuance of intuitive eating to be lost. "The [idea] that it's 'eat whatever you want all the time' is way off the mark and doesn't account for one of the principles that is gentle nutrition," says Stamp.

It's also not another set of food rules to follow or a tool for weight loss. Intuitive eating is easily reshaped into a "diet in disguise" in the wrong hands, warns Cohen. "The anti-diet movement has become really trendy and as a result there are a lot of people who are jumping on the bandwagon ... and while I think that's collectively awesome, I think there's a lot of confusing messages now," she explains. "For example, you have people claiming to help you heal your relationship with food, but in their next post they're talking about how to do intermittent fasting or telling you to stop filling your face with food. And it's hard to trust who's actually going to help you find balance with food and who's just using it for marketing."

Some pointers for spotting undercover diet culture? Cohen suggests being wary of supposed anti-diet accounts spruiking before-and-after photos, telling you to cut foods, or encouraging cleanses or detoxes.

The sweet spot

If anti-dieters and kilojoule counters agree on anything, it's that there's no one-size-fits-all answer. "It's for each to ... figure out [on their own], but [dieting] should not be ruled out," says Smith; while Cohen says that the anti-diet movement isn't a magic cure for body dissatisfaction. "Until the [mainstream] culture shifts, we're going to feel like we're swimming upstream to get a sense of self-acceptance," she explains.

Whether you're pro or anti diet, learning to let go of a "thin is best" mentality is the healthy balance we could all use more of, argues Stamp. "Rather than defining health from one number, shifting the focus to what we do – what we eat, if we exercise – will improve our health independent of a number on a scale."

For Sepel, it's about kindness. "When we treat our bodies with kindness, eat nourishing foods, rest more and stress less, our bodies naturally find their balanced weight," she says. "And this looks different for everyone. There is no perfect shape or size." More kindness, less diets? We'll raise a doughnut to that. **wh**

For help with an eating disorder or body image issue, please call Butterfly's National Helpline on 1800 334 673 or email support@thebutterflyfoundation.org.au

Intuitive eating, decoded

Psychologist Glenn Mackintosh breaks down a few key principles of intuitive eating (that Insta probably won't tell you about)

Unconditional permission to eat: "Basically, you can eat whatever you want. [Intuitive eaters] see food as morally neutral and take those judgements off food."

Honouring your hunger and fullness: "This doesn't mean that you have to eat as soon as you're hungry or stop as soon as you're

full. But it does mean that you can start to use your inner wisdom."

Transcending: "You're really transcending a lot of those non-hungry eating cues, like eating because the food's there, or eating because you're emotional."

Food choice body congruence: "This means you are eating in a way

that your body likes, noticing what foods make you feel good."

Eating mindfully: "When you eat, pay attention to your food. When you eat mindfully, you're going to enjoy foods more. And there's research to show that you can get more nutrition from the same food if you eat it more mindfully."