



# CONSUMED



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## Paint-By-Number or Masterpiece: Restrictive vs. Healthy Eating

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There is a harmful idea virus that has become so widespread, so ubiquitous, that it is accepted as normal. It has subtly integrated itself into our beliefs, our thoughts, our language, our behavior and our reality. It's so pervasive that it has become "conventional wisdom" and almost no one questions it.

### So What Is This Idea Virus?

It is the belief that restrictive eating is healthy eating. It usually starts with information about nutrition or weight management that mutates into rules and restriction. But the blurring of the line between healthy eating and restrictive eating is the difference between a work of art and paint-by-number. Either way, you end up with a nice picture—until you get up close to take a look.

### Healthy Eating vs. Restrictive Eating

In Charge	In Control
Nourishment	Diet
Fuel	Calories
Quality	Points
Healthy	Skinny
Aware	Preoccupied
Conscious	Consumed
Mindful	Vigilant
Information	Dogma
Guide	Rules
All foods fit	Good or bad
Balance	Perfection
Variety	Temptation
Moderation	Deprivation
Choosing	Earning
Deciding	Rationalizing
Flexible	Rigid
Hunger based	By the clock
Comfort	Portion sizes
Physical Activity	Penance
Effortless	Willpower
Trust	Fear
Learning	Failing
Self-acceptance	Condemnation
Enjoyment	Guilt
Pleasure	Shame
Freedom	Bondage

The main reason that this virus is so powerful is that it has a built-in protective mechanism: the underlying belief that people who are overweight are incapable of handling freedom or choice. This belief ensures the survival of the virus because when you try to restrict yourself (or others) it actually leads to *more* cravings for the foods you've labeled "bad." When you finally "give in," you're more likely to overeat, *proving* that you are incapable of handling freedom or choice leading to more restriction.

One of the reasons that this idea virus is so successful at replicating itself is that it initially appears to be beneficial to its host so many people will intentionally seek out. For many people that promote health, wellness and weight loss, "lifestyle change" and "healthy eating" have become euphemisms for "you're going to be on this diet for the rest of your life." The virus is so subtle and so ingrained that they usually don't even realize that restriction is at the core of their message.

### How is this Idea Virus Spread?

You are most prone to this virus if you're overweight (or think you are). Everybody else that has the virus tries to give it to you in an effort to help you (or sell you something). It takes the form of rational suggestions, loving advice and even harsh criticism.

The idea virus spreads vertically through advertising, television, magazines, books, the Internet and medical research. It is propagated by marketers, models, celebrities, reporters, experts, bloggers, researchers and legislators. It then spreads horizontally from doctor to patient, dietitian to client, friend to friend, wife to husband and parent to child. This virus is also swiftly moving from the United States to the rest of the world.

### How to Cure This Virus

Take a close look at the "picture of health" you're painting. Is it constrained by rigid lines and someone else's choice of colors? Or does it express your individuality, your preferences and your lifestyle? Choose now how you want

to create *your* work of art. Here are some specific steps to rid yourself of the "restrictive eating is healthy eating" virus.

1. Diagnose the virus. Filter everything you read, hear and say by asking, "Is this restrictive in nature?" (You might be surprised when you start to notice just how pervasive it really is!)
2. Begin to monitor your little voice. (This virus is sneaky so it may be helpful to journal so you capture the real essence of your beliefs, thoughts, feelings and choices.) When you notice restrictive eating thoughts from the second column above, gently replace them with true healthy eating thoughts from the first column.
3. The virus may have you convinced that you are incapable of managing your weight without rigid rules. Find role models, health care providers and non-diet approaches that don't propagate the virus. With time, support and new tools you *can* do it!
4. Use nutrition information as a tool not a weapon. Remember, all foods fit into a healthy diet.
5. Make the healthiest choice you can *without* feeling deprived. All foods fit using balance, variety and moderation.
6. Let go of the belief that you need to eat perfectly – that is the virus talking. Accept that you'll sometimes regret certain choices you make – that is part of healthy eating. When you don't get caught up in guilt and shame, you're able to learn from your experiences.
7. Repeat this often: "It's just food and I *can* learn to trust and nourish myself without restriction."
8. Discover joy in creating your masterpiece!

Michelle May, M.D. is a recovered yoyo dieter and the award-winning author of *Am I Hungry? What to Do When Diets Don't Work*. Find additional articles and resources at <http://AmIHungry.com/>.