

# EATING TO LIVE:

## *A Conversation with Michelle May*



By Ronda Lee Levine

The topic of “food” often brings up mixed feelings. The United States is a country of abundance. The downside of this bounty is that too often we eat too much. This brings about “dieting,” the restriction of food based upon rules. Michelle May is no stranger to this pattern. At a very young age, she struggled with food and body image, always searching for the “right diet.” It wasn’t until after many years of working her own medical practice, where she would advise clients on how to lose weight, hear about their struggles with traditional dieting, and notices that no one would receive the results that they wanted, that she developed the keys to long-term success when it comes to managing weight. In her book, *Eat What You Love, Love What You Eat*, she calls for a return to the instinctive patterns of childhood – eating only when hungry and having fun when exercising. Recently, I had the opportunity to talk with Dr. May.

**RONDA LEVINE (RL):** What is the first step in living a healthier lifestyle?

**MICHELLE MAY (MM):** The first step is to stop dieting. For many people, they do not realize how diets contribute to the results we see. When people diet, they become more focused on food, not less. We use food for so many reasons; by going on a diet to solve our problems, we only get a temporary fix. In the end, dieting makes problems worse.

**RL:** You’ve mentioned the large portion obsession in America. Can you talk about what healthy portions look like?

**MM:** Food is relatively inexpensive and portions are way too large if we let a restaurant make choices for us. A stomach is only about the size of a fist when empty. It only holds a couple of handfuls of food comfortably. Feeling good isn’t about portion control; it’s about feeling my best, so that I’m not distracted by discomfort, and so that my energy level is not low after eating. Portion control is diet thinking. This is about shifting to self-care thinking.

**RL:** You run a workshop called “Am I Hungry?” that helps participants to eat instinctively. What do you mean by this?

**MM:** Eating instinctively means we return to our roots. Children eat when they are hungry and they stop eating when they are full, no matter how much they have left on their plate. By eating instinctively, we eat only when we’re hungry and stop eating when we receive signals that we are full.

**RL:** If someone has pounds to lose, how should they start?

**MM:** A wonderful way to start is by recognizing the difference between wanting and needing to eat. Here’s an analogy. You are driving down the road and see a gas station on the right. The thing that you do next is check the fuel gauge. You’re going to think about eating when you see a commercial, feel stressed, bored, etc. Rather than automatically eating, you need to ask “Do I actually need this fuel right now?” Checking your fuel gauge is about figuring out why you want to eat. If your fuel levels are dropping, you will need to make food. But if you’re not even hungry, there is no point. Often when people want to lose weight, they forget the real reason why they’re eating in the first place.

**RL:** Can you explain for our readers why yo-yo dieting doesn’t work?

**MM:** Physiologically, when people lose weight from dieting, they lose muscle, water, and fat. But when they gain the weight back, they gain fat, and it makes it easier for them to gain more weight. Dieting and yo-yo dieting cause us to focus too much on food. When a dieter overeats,

they punish themselves with exercise, through exercising to earn the right to eat. This causes dieters not only to develop a bad relationship with food, but to hate exercise because it is seen as a punishment. Yo-yo dieting is a setup for long-term problems.

Instead, we should think of a pendulum. We might sometimes under eat, other times we might over eat. But we should try to move that pendulum into a smaller arc in the middle. At each eating decision, each meal, each day, you’re tweaking your meals to meet your situation. You need to trust your body to moderate and tell you how much you need.

**RL:** For children who are picky eaters, or who refuse to eat, what advice do you have for parents?

**MM:** It’s normal for children to be picky, and some children have exquisitely sensitive taste buds. The earlier and more consistently you expose them to different types of food, the better. Offer children variety. Studies show that it takes up to ten exposures to get children to eat new foods and acquire a new taste. Turn this into a positive. Say, “I know you didn’t like broccoli when you were little, but you’re getting bigger, we have to try it again.” When we bribe children with desert, we are saying, “the dinner is the yucky food; the desert is the prize.”

**RL:** What are some great ways those people who say, “I don’t have time to exercise” can build activity into their lives?

**MM:** There was a study recently in the Journal of the American Medical Association talking about women

needing to do an hour of exercise a day to prevent weight gain. At the least, exercise most days of the week joyfully and consistently as much as you can. The message here is to start wherever you can and don’t make it big, so that your body will get used to it, your schedule will get used to it, and as you get better and better you will find time and find more activities. It will become something that you get to do, not that you have to do. It’s okay if you don’t like the gym. It is about experimenting until you find something that you do enjoy.

**RL:** Equanimity is a magazine about finding balance in all aspects of one’s life. What are the ways that you incorporate balance in your life?

**MM:** One of the things that I love is balancing eating for nourishment with eating for enjoyment. We are more satisfied when eating in a way that truly gives fulfillment – fearless eating. Skip the things that you don’t care about. Love what you eat – mindful eating – and eat with the intention of feeling better than when you started. People can find more balance in their lives if they stop focusing so much on food and weight and start focusing on living their full life.

**RL:** What is one piece of advice you would like to give our readers?

**MM:** The idea here, really, going back to the balance issue, balancing mind, body, heart, spirit, is not about following the perfect diet and exercise program. Instead, it is about practicing self-care and eating in a way that supports that balanced, fulfilling life. 