A reader’s question: “In the process of studying non-dieting and health at every size. We started with Eating Competence, and my students and colleagues ask about Intuitive Eating (IE) and Mindful eating (ME). It sounds like IE and ME fit nicely with your ideas, but I was wondering what you thought.”

Thank you for your question. People are confused about the different approaches. They are also unclear about the difference between “ideas” and a "model."

ecSatter is a model. A model is a cohesive set of evidence-based behavioral principles that provides a logical framework for implementation and it can be objectively examined. ecSatter is concretely described¹ and examined by a validated test.² The two key elements of ecSatter are the discipline of providing yourself with regular, reliable, and rewarding meals and snacks and paying attention while you eat, and your permission to yourself to eat what and as much as you want at those regular eating times. Structure provides support for internally regulated eating because rhythms of hunger and appetite adjust to rhythms of food availability. The four components of ecSatter are 1) positive attitudes about eating combined with skills in the areas of 2) internal regulation, 3) food acceptance, and 4) context management.

I put my name on ecSatter to protect it from appropriation and amendment. As a model, ecSatter is only effective when all the elements are in place. And it is effective. ecSatter has been examined and verified by didactic research published in peer-reviewed journals. People who are eating competent do better nutritionally,²⁴ medically,⁵ emotionally, and socially, and have less body dissatisfaction and fewer other symptoms of eating disorders.²

Other approaches to eating management I consider Intuitive Eating (IE) to be a model as well, but it isn’t my model, and it is quite different from ecSatter. Tribole and Resch’s Intuitive Eating⁶ is well-defined, evidence based, and has a validated test.⁷ The three elements of IE are unconditional permission to eat, eating for physical rather than emotional reasons, and reliance on internal hunger/satiety cues.⁷ Mindful eating is neither a method or a model. It is a vaguely and variously defined term that gets picked up by people and programs, seemingly to describe attentive, internally regulated eating. Non-dieting is an even more vaguely defined term defined by what it isn’t rather than what it is. In usage, the term can refer to approaches such as food management point systems or behavioral weight control programs.

Permission and discipline. Along with ecSatter, IE is based on permission, as is any successful approach to addressing negative and conflicted eating attitudes and behaviors: Permission to eat as much as you want, what you want, and weigh what you will in response to your positive and self-respecting approach to food.

With respect to discipline, all but ecSatter reject the principle of structure, seeing structure as substituting external rules for inner experience and therefore
as being tantamount to restriction. This is a huge difference, as structure is a critical element of ecSatter, and structure provides the adult context for the division of responsibility in feeding. From the perspective of ecSatter, structure supports eating as a social activity. Structure, along with strong permission to eat preferred food, supports tuning in to food and internal cues at certain times, then being free of food preoccupation and urgency to eat at other times. Instead of structure, IE essentially encourages eating on demand. However, IE is not discipline-free. During eating, IE emphasizes the discipline of being tuned in to food and eating.

Recovering internal regulation. The key intervention with ecSatter is to “have structured meals (and snacks) with enjoyable foods, and go to the table hungry (but not famished) and eat in a tuned-in fashion until you are satisfied. Then stop, reassuring yourself that another opportunity to eat is coming soon and you can do it again.” Educationally, gaining eating competence is experiential, in that meal after meal, day after day, you gain sensitivity and trust with respect to internal processes that guide eating. Clinically, recovery from trauma around eating and regaining positive attitudes and internal capabilities with eating depends on in-session desensitization training, reframing, self-awareness and self-acceptance training, and discovery in the course of take-home assignments.

The key intervention with IE appears to be to give yourself unconditional permission to eat - what you want, when you want, as much as you want. The task is to be in constant touch with hunger and appetite, eating at the moment when hunger reaches a critical, subjectively defined level, and eating food that is appetitively salient. Behaviorists call this approach flooding: exposing yourself to unlimited amounts of the feared stimulus until its fear potential is neutralized and moderate and stable eating evolves. Clinically, IE depends on in-session teaching, discussion, and encouragement to replace negative eating attitudes and behaviors with positive ones.

The basic hunger/satiety scale from King, Kratina, and Hayse’s Moving Away from Diets at times pops up and is attributed to ecSatter. It is theirs, not mine. While my nutrition education article considers levels of satiety, those considerations are in no way intended to be used to teach internal regulation. From the ecSatter perspective, discovery of internal regulators is an experiential, not a cognitive process.

Nutritional guidance. Addressing nutrition without taking away permission to eat is a dilemma with any method that aims to restore internally regulated eating. Many resolve the dilemma by not addressing nutrition and even actively discouraging its consideration.

Nutritional excellence is and always has been an integral component of ecSatter. Dietary quality, to the extent of the person’s ability and life circumstances, grows out of having meals that are “richly rewarding to plan, prepare, provide and eat,” and respecting appetite not only during planning but during eating. “Even if you planned it and cooked it, you don’t have to eat it.” Chapter 13 in Secrets is based on the principle that “with awareness comes choice.” It systematically blesses the food and educates readers about nutrition so they can make wise and
rewarding choices without getting caught in food rules.

*Intuitive Eating* Principle 10, “Honor Your Health” addresses “gentle nutrition.” IE encourages eating “what you really want” and savoring food. Nutritional excellence appears to be a separate process: “In matters of taste, consider nutrition; in matters of nutrition, consider taste.” Good line, but it implies more of a cognitive process than the experientially evolving process described in the food hierarchy.  

**Emotional eating** From the ecSatter perspective, emotional eating is a normal and legitimate way of taking care of yourself. However, emotional eating can be *abused* when feelings go straight to eating and/or when eating is a primary or only way of self-caring. Because the body’s regulatory processes (hunger, squandering/conserving energy) correct for variations and errors in food regulation, even eating a *lot* for emotional reasons doesn’t necessarily cause weight gain.

IE attributes excessive weight gain to eating for emotional reasons and predicts weight loss when emotional eating is resolved. The IE solution is psychological: identifying underlying issues and thereby preventing emotional eating.

**What's in a name?** In her excellent studies on non-dieting, Linda Bacon called her eating management approach “intuitive eating,” although she did not credit Tribole and Resch or use their methods. Bacon used a combination of stop-dieting/size acceptance education and persuasion and a compendium of cognitive, behavioral, and nutritional weight management approaches.

Certainly all of our ideas are sparked by the thinking and work of others. But attribution is important. Maybe they care less about this than I do, but I want Tribole and Resche to be credited when their Intuitive Eating name is used. In fact, we would all benefit from remembering whose shoulders we are standing on. While I don’t find the concept of on-demand eating to be useful, I was still helped out of my conventional rut by the thinking of Hirschmann and Munter, *Overcoming* *Overeating*, who in turn were influenced by Susan Kano, *Making Peace with Food*. Or the other way around. Of course, Geneen Roth’s *Feeding the Hungry Heart* also played a part in the whole stew of freeing ideas about eating and weight. You undoubtedly think of other people who influenced you, and that is good.

**Take-home message:** Many clinicians and educators use an eclectic approach to eating management, mixing together elements of models, approaches, and philosophies. While those elements need to be attributed and their origins acknowledged, it is important to remember that the product of such mixing-together represents a whole new approach. That approach must, in turn, be clearly and distinctively named and concretely described so it can be scrutinized using clinical data and didactic testing. Only then can it recognized as effective. It might even earn the honorific of being designated a model!

**References**

1. Satter EM. Eating Competence: definition and evidence for the Satter Eating Competence


