

A GUIDE FROM DR. JUD BREWER

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# The 3 Hidden Patterns That Keep You Stuck with Food

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*What my clinical research on eating habits revealed about why we  
struggle with food — and what to do about it*

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# Why Your Relationship with Food Hasn't Changed

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You've tried changing how you eat.

Maybe calorie counting. Maybe cleanses. Maybe just telling yourself to stop. And maybe it worked, for a while. Then you found yourself at 10pm, standing in front of the fridge, knowing you're not hungry, reaching for food anyway.

Here's what I've found from working with thousands of people who struggle with food: the problem isn't willpower. It isn't discipline. It isn't that you're weak or broken.

The problem is that your brain has learned habits around food that run beneath your awareness. They're so automatic that by the time you notice, you've already eaten half the bag.

*"It's not you. It's your habits."*

Think of it like this: you're trying to change how you eat with your planning brain (the rational, logical part). But your survival brain, the ancient part that drives habits, is running the show. And it doesn't care about your meal plan.

I've spent years studying these patterns in my lab at Brown University, in my Eat Right Now program, and in clinical practice. My research team found that participants dropped craving-related eating by 40%. Not by trying harder. By learning to see these hidden patterns for what they are.

I've identified several of these patterns. But first, I want to show you how they work.

# How Your Brain Gets Stuck

Every unwanted eating pattern runs on the same brain mechanism: reward-based learning. Trigger, behavior, result. Your brain files away what "works" and repeats it automatically.

Trigger → Behavior → Result

*"The same system that built the habit can unlearn it."*

The good news: the same learning system that built these habits can change them. I use a framework called the Three Gears to help people do this.

## ***Gear 1: Map the Loop***

Before you can change a pattern, you have to see it. Most people have never actually mapped what triggers their eating, what they do, and what they get from it.

**Trigger:** stress after a long day. **Behavior:** open the fridge, eat standing up. **Result:** 30 seconds of relief, then guilt.

When you map the loop, something shifts. The pattern that was invisible starts becoming visible. You can't change what you can't see.

## ***Gear 2: Get Curious, Not Critical***

When a craving hits, the instinct is to either give in or white-knuckle through it. Both keep the loop running. Instead, get curious: *what does this craving actually feel like in my body?* You're not fighting it. You're investigating it. When you bring curiosity to a craving instead of judgment, the craving starts losing its grip. Your brain is updating the reward value in real time.

## ***Gear 3: Find Something Better***

Your brain is always moving toward greater reward. You can't force it to stop wanting. But you can help it discover that something else — curiosity, a walk, a breath, genuine connection — is actually more rewarding than the food was. This isn't willpower. It's your brain's own learning system, working *for* you instead of against you.

### THE FOUNDATION

These three gears are the engine of change. Now let me show you the specific patterns that keep the loops running — the habits you may not even realize you have.

# The 3 Most Common Patterns

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## 01

### The Shame Spiral

You eat something "off-limits." Immediately, the voice shows up: *"Why did you do that?" "You have no self-control." "Start fresh Monday."*

*"Can you see yourself in any of these?"*

That guilt isn't motivating. It's the ignition switch for another habit loop. Shame makes you feel terrible, so your brain does what it's learned to do when you feel terrible: reach for food. Eat, feel guilty, restrict, binge, feel more shame. Round and round.

I had a patient I'll call Tasha. She was bingeing on entire large pizzas 20 out of 30 days a month. Not because she loved pizza. Because the shame after each binge was so intense that the only thing that soothed it was more food.

**The shame isn't protecting you. It's fuel for the loop.**

#### TRY THIS

Next time the critical voice shows up after eating ("You shouldn't have done that"), don't argue with it. Just notice it. Name the voice like a character: "Oh, there's the judge again." You're not fixing anything yet. You're just seeing the pattern.

## 02

### Eating to Numb

You're not hungry. You know you're not hungry. But something is wrong — stress, boredom, anxiety, loneliness — and food is the fastest thing that makes it go away. This isn't a character flaw. It's reinforcement learning. Your brain learned that food reliably changes how you feel. Trigger: uncomfortable emotion. Behavior: eat. Result: temporary relief.

One of my patients, Rob, had been using fast food to numb anxiety since the fifth grade. By age 40, he was 180 pounds overweight. He would eat in his car and throw away the wrappers so nobody would see. He wasn't eating because he liked the food. He was eating because it was the only thing that turned down the volume on his anxiety.

#### TRY THIS

Next time you reach for food between meals, pause for five seconds and ask: **"What am I feeling right now?"** Not to stop yourself. Just notice what's happening emotionally before you reach for food.

## The Hunger-Craving Confusion

Most people who struggle with eating cannot tell the difference between physical hunger and an emotional craving. In my clinic, when I asked a group of people with binge eating, "How many of you can tell if you're actually hungry right now?" not a single person raised their hand.

*"These are 3 of many."*

Physical hunger builds gradually, can wait a few minutes, and goes away when you eat enough. Cravings hit suddenly, feel urgent, and focus on specific foods. And eating doesn't satisfy them, because the real need isn't nutritional. You're feeding a want, not a need.

### TRY THIS

Before your next meal, check in: "Am I physically hungry, or is something else going on?" Rate hunger from 1 to 10. After eating, ask: "How *content* do I feel?" Not satisfied. Content. There's a difference. Just notice which one you experience.

## What Comes Next

These three patterns are the most common, but they're not the only ones. Behind them are the **pleasure plateau** (the point where enjoyment peaks and eating past it makes everything worse), the **craving loop** that runs even when you know better, the **food rules** you inherited from childhood that now feel like a prison, and the **"hungry ghost"** that eats and eats but never feels full.

Recognizing these patterns matters. One participant lost 14 pounds just from mapping his eating habit loops, without dieting at all. But changing them in the moment — at the fridge at 10pm, halfway through a bag of chips — that's harder to do alone.

“ *You can't read the label from inside the bottle.* ”

That's why I built the eating and food track inside **Going Beyond Anxiety**, with specific tools (including one that drops craving-related eating after just 10–15 uses), guided practices, and a community of people working on the same patterns.

Ready to change your relationship with food?

Going Beyond Anxiety includes the complete eating and craving toolkit. 30-day money-back guarantee.

[goingbeyondanxiety.com](https://goingbeyondanxiety.com)

Dr. Judson Brewer is a physician-scientist, New York Times bestselling author of "The Hunger Habit," "Unwinding Anxiety," and "The Craving Mind," and director of research and innovation at Brown University's Mindfulness Center.

*Going Beyond Anxiety is not therapy. It's an evidence-based approach that helps you understand and change your eating patterns through neuroscience, not willpower.*