



# The Joy of Eating: Being a Competent Eater

By Ellyn Satter, MS, MSSW, Dietitian and Family Therapist

Eating Competence is being positive, comfortable, and flexible with eating as well as matter-of-fact and reliable about getting enough to eat of enjoyable food. Even though they don't worry about what and how much to eat, Competent Eaters do better nutritionally, are more active, sleep better and have better medical tests. They are more self-aware and self-accepting, not only with food, but in all ways. To be a Competent Eater, be relaxed, self-trusting and joyful about eating, and take good care of yourself with food.

**Feed yourself faithfully.** Reassure yourself you will be fed. Structure is the supportive framework for taking care of yourself with food.

- Take time to eat.
- Develop a meal and snack routine that works for you.
- Include foods you truly enjoy. Don't be ruled by lists of food-to-eat and food-to-avoid.
- Make eating times pleasant. Relax. Pay attention. Take your time.
- Experiment with new food when you get ready; take it slowly.

**Give yourself permission to eat.** Reassure yourself: "It's all right to eat. I just need to sit down and enjoy."

- Eat what you want. Your body needs variety and your soul needs pleasure.
- Eat as much as you want. Your body knows how much it needs to eat.
- Go to meals and snacks hungry (not starved) and eat until you truly feel like stopping.
- Pay attention to your food. Taste it! Enjoy it!
- Eat it if it tastes good; don't if doesn't!

**Notice as you learn and grow.** Becoming a competent eater is a process, and it takes time. As you combine *structure* with giving yourself *permission* to eat, you will find your eating falling into place.

- You feel good about your eating and are reliable about seeing to it that you get fed.
- You get better and better at eating as much as you are hungry for.
- You eat fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and other nutritious foods because you enjoy them, not because you have to.
- Having "forbidden foods" at meals and snacks makes them ordinary foods to eat in ordinary ways.
- Big servings don't make you overeat. You eat it all if you want to, not if you don't.

**For more about** helping yourself become a Competent Eater, read [Feeding Yourself with Love and Good Sense](#).  
**For more about** the evidence showing that Competent Eating is good for you, see [The Satter Eating Competence Model](#)