

The Satter Hierarchy of Food Needs

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The Satter Hierarchy of Food Needs demonstrates that when you feed yourself faithfully and reassure yourself that you will be fed, you will learn and grow with eating.

Having grown and developed to point of seeking novel food or, even before that, seeking good tasting food, your nutritional status is likely to be just fine.



Satter's Hierarchy of Food Needs

Trust yourself to learn and grow

According to Abraham Maslow, growth occurs on its own, in its own time, in sequence. From the foundation through the apex on Maslow's pyramid-shaped hierarchy of growth, those needs are: (1) physiological needs: air, water, food, shelter, sleep, sex; (2) safety, security, order; (3) social affection: love, belonging; (4) esteem, status; self-esteem and esteem by others; and (5) self-actualization: being all the individual can be.¹ Children develop, and so do we. Our true nature is to learn and grow, and we do that as we mature, learn from life and manage our world. As we satisfy needs at each level, we instinctively address needs at the next level. Arranging food needs in a similar hierarchy, from the foundation through the apex, gives *Satter's Hierarchy of Food Needs*.² This is based on the Satter Eating Competence Model, ecSatter.

Enough food

Do you have enough to eat? Many people scare themselves into being afraid of not getting enough to eat when they try to follow weight-reduction or other restrictive diets or live by today's food-avoidance credo, "don't eat so much; don't eat the food you like." Even more seriously, 40% of people in the US suffer from food insecurity. Such low-income people need and deserve to get Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, but less than half do.³ SNAP benefits help recipients get enough to eat and thereby begin moving up on the Satter Food



Hierarchy. SNAP education (SNAP-ed) can help even more by prioritizing strategies for getting enough to eat: Making liberal use of high-starch food, fat, and sugar to satisfy energy and appetite needs.⁴ Filling up on potatoes or rice, frying food, buttering vegetables, and using fruit canned in heavy syrup are worthwhile and healthy strategies, even before you consider what respectable, responsible, and hungry parents do to feed their families: They go hungry themselves, scrounge other people's leftovers, remove spoiled sections, slime, mold, and insects from food and cook meat found as road kill.⁵

Acceptable food

Do you have food you enjoy? Hand in hand with getting enough to eat is having access to and letting yourself eat food you consider "acceptable." This is a personal definition. I grew up on potatoes; my family rarely ate rice and considered a meal without potatoes as not being a meal at all. It may have been the opposite for you. One person finds using SNAP benefits or going to food pantries acceptable; another doesn't.

Reliable, ongoing access to food

When you feel confident of being able to satisfy today's food needs, you are freed up to consider what you will eat the next meal or the next day. You will move toward planning for subsequent meals, accumulating a food stash, and saving up for food purchases. Having reliable access to enough food you find acceptable, not just today but also tomorrow and into the future, gives you food security. Again, keep in mind that even if you have enough money to spend on food, you will make yourself *feel* food-insecure with rigid definitions of "healthy" food and/or weight-reduction dieting.

Good-tasting food

Does your usual food not taste as good as it used to? Your appetite will become more prominent for a while once you are consistently able to eat as much as you want of food you enjoy. Most people prioritize taste in food selection.⁶ Once you are free from the danger of going hungry, food preference takes on a different spin. When you don't have enough to eat (or are scaring yourself that you don't), almost anything tastes good. Now that you aren't going without, you get pickier. Honor your appetite. You are entitled. This won't last forever.

Novel food

Are you getting tired of eating the same food all the time? After you have had plenty of time to eat as much as you want of food you enjoy, you will find yourself tiring of even your favorite foods. You will begin taking an interest in new foods or perhaps in familiar foods prepared in new ways. You will begin to experiment. Your experimentation—over months or *years*—will lead you to ever-so-gradually increase the variety in your diet. You will improve your nutritional status, and you will do it because you *want* to and it feels right, not because you *have* to. When you are at the Novel

Food level on the Food Hierarchy, you are in good shape nutritionally. You have likely become Eating Competent.

Instrumental food

Do you consider what is good for you when you eat? This is the one item on ecSI 2.0, the test for ecSatter, that addresses *what* you eat. In the context of ecSatter, considering what is good for you is *not* the top of a slippery slide back down to “don’t eat so much; don’t eat the food you like.” Instead, from the ecSatter perspective, functioning at the instrumental food level is a both-and, not an either-or, consideration. You eat food you enjoy *and* consider to be good for you. You eat what is good for you *if* you enjoy it. You *never* have to count it, measure it, or weigh it. If you have long been traumatized by food rules, it will take a *long* time before you can comfortably take into account what is good for you when you choose food. If ever. If you try to do it before you are ready, it will throw your eating into disarray and make you feel bad. This is not to say that you will do poorly nutritionally if you don’t think about what is good for you. Having developed to the point of *seeking novel food* or, even before that, *seeking good-tasting food*, your nutritional status is likely to be just fine.

If you *want* to and are consistently *able* to, when you have solidly developed to the instrumental food level of the Satter Food Hierarchy, you can consider what to eat based on your nutritional, spiritual, environmental, or political goals. But don’t violate the principle that has gotten you here: You *must* be grounded in the unqualified reassurance that you will get enough to eat of food you enjoy.

To become Eating Competent, take care of yourself with food

Family meals are the cornerstone of getting enough to eat and foundation for the development that flows from food security. A meal is when you all sit together facing each other and share the same food. Period.

- Eat what you eat now. Just have it at regular meal- and snack-times.
- Figure out practical and enjoyable ways to provide yourself with three meals a day, and sit-down snacks if you need them.
- Trust yourself to learn and grow. You will move up on the Satter Food Hierarchy when you are ready.
- Don’t try to push yourself beyond what feels genuinely comfortable to you. You will slow your growth, not make it go faster.

References

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