

But I Don't Diet

EXCERPT FROM *ALMOST ANOREXIC*, BY JENNIFER J. THOMAS, PH.D., HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL, AND JENNI SCHAEFER

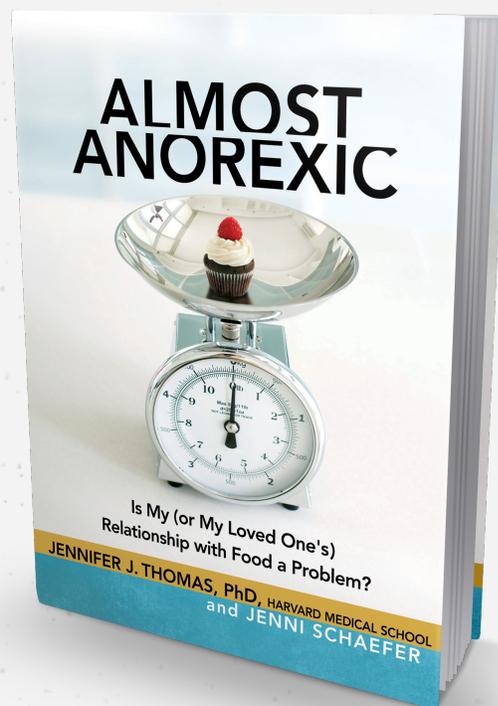
These days, many of us carry a smartphone. Consider this: would you have purchased your current brand if it had a reputation for failing the vast majority of the time? Probably not. But for years our society has kept dieting despite the well-documented failure rate.

Luckily for the weight-loss industry, dieters typically blame themselves when they gain the weight back, thus keeping their wallets open for the next miracle slimming plan. Some diets focus on a specific food—from grapefruit to cookies—while others, with the help of strategic exercise, promise to change a certain body part like your abs or backside. The tube-feeding diet, popularized in Europe, is so drastic that it requires a feeding tube that holds a minimal amount of liquid calories to be run through a person's nose right down into the stomach!¹ Low-carbohydrate diets are popular worldwide from Atkins (in the United States) to Dukan (in France). Others encourage more obvious—though no more effective—approaches such as consuming very few calories per day or skipping meals. Some people jump on a certain diet bandwagon only to jump off and then start the same—or possibly different—one later. Unfortunately, as discussed in chapter 3, chronic or “yo-yo” dieting is typically associated with weight *gain*, rather than loss, over time.

You might be breathing a sigh of relief right now thinking, *But I don't diet*. Jenni used to believe the same thing even though she did restrict herself to small amounts of certain types of food due to concerns about her weight. That's clearly one form of dieting. She knows that now. As the public has become increasingly savvy to the mantra “Diets don't work,” the diet industry has stayed in business by cleverly repackaging its wares as “lifestyle changes.” Why else would they be promoting books with names like *The No Diet, Diet*?² Although some life-style changes are healthy, others can be dieting in disguise. Here are just a few examples.

Food Allergies

Are you avoiding dairy or gluten because you think you might be allergic or intolerant? Food allergies involve a severe, possibly fatal, reaction to a limited number of foods—most commonly soy, wheat, eggs, milk, fish, shellfish, peanuts, or tree nuts. Studies suggest that approximately 6 percent of children and 1 to 2 percent of adults have *bona fide* food allergies³ and must therefore abstain from at least one of these foods. Similarly, celiac disease, an autoimmune disorder that affects less than 1 percent of American adults, requires that sufferers follow a gluten-free diet and abstain from many types of foods and liquids, including wheat, French fries, soy sauce, and beer. Although food allergies are a very real phenomenon, in some cases they are just another smoke screen for dieting. A recent nationally representative study found that 96 percent of American adults who reported following a gluten-free diet



tested negative for celiac disease via blood analysis.⁴ Indeed, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease explicitly discourages food allergy self-diagnosis since people tend to be wrong in 50 to 90 percent of cases.⁵ According to Klarman Eating Disorders Center dietitian Jaimie Winkler, “With a lot of food intolerances, people cite bloating and stomach discomfort as ‘the symptom,’ but truthfully, it’s very human to sometimes bloat and have discomfort after meals. If it resolves within thirty minutes, chances are you aren’t allergic, just human.”⁶ In light of these findings, we recommend asking your doctor for a skin test, blood test, or food challenge test before emptying your cupboards of bread, nuts, and pasta.

Sugar and Flour Addiction

A new generation of research on the possibility of food addiction has identified that anticipation of eating highly palatable food activates areas of the brain similar to those activated by drugs and alcohol.⁷ Some—but not all—Twelve Step programs even ask their members to abstain from foods like sugar and white flour, which they believe are addictive.⁸ But there is no evidence that eliminating specific foods (such as flour or sugar) from your diet is an effective way to prevent binge eating. On the contrary, there is much more evidence that trying to eliminate these foods from your diet will make you even more likely to binge. Here’s why: we frequently crave what we won’t let ourselves have. Have you ever turned down a dessert that you really wanted at a restaurant only to get home with an intense desire for something sweet? Dr. Thomas has worked with many patients who have exhausted their willpower trying to avoid eating a delicious homemade cookie at a party, only to feel deprived and binge on an entire box of stale store-bought cookies on the drive home.

Vegetarianism

There are all kinds of good reasons to become vegetarian (eating a plant-based diet without meat) or even vegan (abstaining from all animal products). Some are tied to long-standing cultural and religious beliefs; others stem from authentic concerns for animal rights. But some are just excuses for dieting. We have connected with many people who suffer from almost anorexia and other officially recognized eating disorders who say things like, “I can’t eat that, because I’m a vegetarian,” or “I would love to have a piece of your birthday cake; too bad I’m vegan.” If you are considering becoming vegetarian, it’s important to be honest with yourself about your motivation for limiting your diet. In one study, 42 percent of vegetarian women who had previously been treated for an eating disorder identified weight management as their primary motivation for avoiding meat, compared to 0 percent of those with no eating disorder history.⁹ So if you don’t belong to any vegetarian organizations, have never read a book on factory farming, and wouldn’t touch a vegan cupcake with a ten-foot pole, you may want to rethink your decision to go meat and/or dairy free.

Going “Raw”

For those who find that vegetarianism and veganism include far too many food choices, going “raw” takes restriction to the next level. Raw foodism is the practice of consuming only uncooked and unprocessed foods, such as fruits, vegetables, nuts, and seeds. Although it sounds healthy, research shows it may cause more harm than good. According to former raw foodist Frederic Patenaude, “Cravings for cooked food are the number one complaint raw foodists have.”¹⁰ He recalled in his book *Raw Food Controversies*, “One day, I was walking down the street, feeling this amazing

craving for food. At that moment, I would have eaten anything: burgers, French fries, or even a steak. However, I didn't allow these thoughts into my consciousness. I was determined to keep eating 100% raw."¹¹ And in a large study of German adults who had consumed at least 70 percent of their diet as raw foods for at least two years, 38 percent were deficient in vitamin B12.¹² Given that B12 deficiency can cause a variety of physical and mental health problems—including fatigue, depression, and memory problems—you may want to think twice before opting to consume all of your foods at 118 degrees or lower.

Religious Restriction

Many people eat, or rather don't eat, in accordance with their religious views. Various forms of fasting are common practice in some religious traditions. For some, this is a way of life—tied to family roots and values—that truly works for them. But for others, spiritual beliefs become an excuse to restrict. We know many people with almost anorexia who have “given up” chocolate for Lent or who have fasted during Ramadan solely to lose weight. For example, as Cherry Boone O'Neill (daughter of American singer Pat Boone) recounted in her anorexia memoir *Starving for Attention*, “Fasting on Thanksgiving Day had really saved me. . . . When I was asked why I had not loaded up my plate like everyone else I just answered with spiritual overtones, ‘I'm fasting today,’ and that was that!”¹³ But is it truly a sacrifice to give up chocolate or another food that you are already afraid to eat? When asked whether individuals with eating disorders should fast on Yom Kippur (the Jewish day of atonement), Orthodox rabbi Dovid Goldwasser responded, “I try to answer the spiritual conflict and say that no, God wants you to eat. Your eating on that day is considered as if you fasted.”¹⁴ Indeed, if you have almost anorexia, it

makes more sense to challenge yourself by eating during these times of spiritual self-reflection.

Caloric Restriction for Longevity

Proponents of calorie restriction (CR) for longevity believe that consistently consuming 10 to 40 percent fewer calories per day than your body burns will make you live longer. Although early research on rats appeared to support this hypothesis, a 2012 study of rhesus monkeys (who are genetically more similar to humans) failed to find any difference in lifespan between those who were adequately fed versus those who were calorie-restricted.¹⁵ Moreover, as clinical psychologist Kelly Vitousek has pointed out, rats and humans live very different lifestyles: “Laboratory animals are typically isolated in individual cages, protected or exempted from germs, temperature variation, work, fatigue, social interaction, parenting and competition. In effect, their only job is to cope with CR, so that all of the meager energy supplied by their otherwise optimal diets can be put straight to that purpose.”¹⁶ Think of it this way: if you are constantly hungry, irritable, and tired on a calorie-restricted diet, your life might just feel longer!

Jennifer J. Thomas, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of psychology in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and co-director of the Eating Disorders Clinical and Research Program at Massachusetts General Hospital. Visit JenniferJThomasPhD.com. Connect with her at [Twitter.com/DrJennyThomas](https://twitter.com/DrJennyThomas).

Jenni Schaefer is a singer/songwriter, speaker, and author of *Life Without Ed* and *Goodbye Ed, Hello Me*. Visit JenniSchaefer.com. Connect with her at [Twitter.com/JenniSchaefer](https://twitter.com/JenniSchaefer) and [Facebook.com/LifeWithoutEd](https://facebook.com/LifeWithoutEd).

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