

Hunger, that unshakable, unwelcome companion of dieters everywhere, has been undergoing an image makeover. The word itself has always been ambiguous, a metaphor for things both great and terrible. Hunger is desire—wistful and delicious in its ferociousness. A love song my parents listened to in the '50s crooned, "I've hungered for your love." The sexuality inherent in hunger made the Victorians frown on women displaying appetites for food: Eating with enthusiasm, especially eating red meat, was seen as unladylike, since it hinted at our lusts.

Hunger has also, for millennia, meant starvation, weakness, and defeat. Our bodies learned to recognize it as a warning signal, and to heed it. But more recently, as dieters, we've learned to fight it as a powerful enemy. I grew up on tips to defeat hunger: Chew gum when you're hungry, my friends advised; drink water before dinner to fool your stomach. The goal was to impose will over hunger, and the method was to somehow feel full even when you were empty.

Now, in a dangerous refinement of the increasingly bizarre dieting culture, hunger is being embraced: "Hunger has been relabeled as a friend," says David M. Garner, MD, director of

Toledo's Center for Eating Disorders and author of a new book, *Handbook of Treatment for Eating Disorders* (Guilford Press). "Women only feel secure if they're hungry—being full now equals bad, and hunger equals virtue."

This strange reversal can cause powerful reactions in the body. Continual, low-grade starvation can induce a state called ketosis, says Garner, in which many sensations, including hunger pangs, are blunted, as well as "delayed gastric emptying," in which the hungry stomach hangs on to its food as long as possible, creating bloating and an exaggerated sense of fullness. Dieters also need to diet ever more stringently to maintain the sensation of hunger. "As dieters lose touch with hunger and satiety . . . it takes more deprivation to induce an awareness of hunger, and it takes more indulgence to induce an awareness of satiety," wrote University of Toronto diet researchers Janet Polivy and C. Peter Herman a decade ago in a groundbreaking article in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*.

How exactly to transform hunger from a secret friend back into an efficient warning system? The cure of the moment, often cited by followers of the antidietering movement and outlined in popular books like *When Women Stop Hating Their*

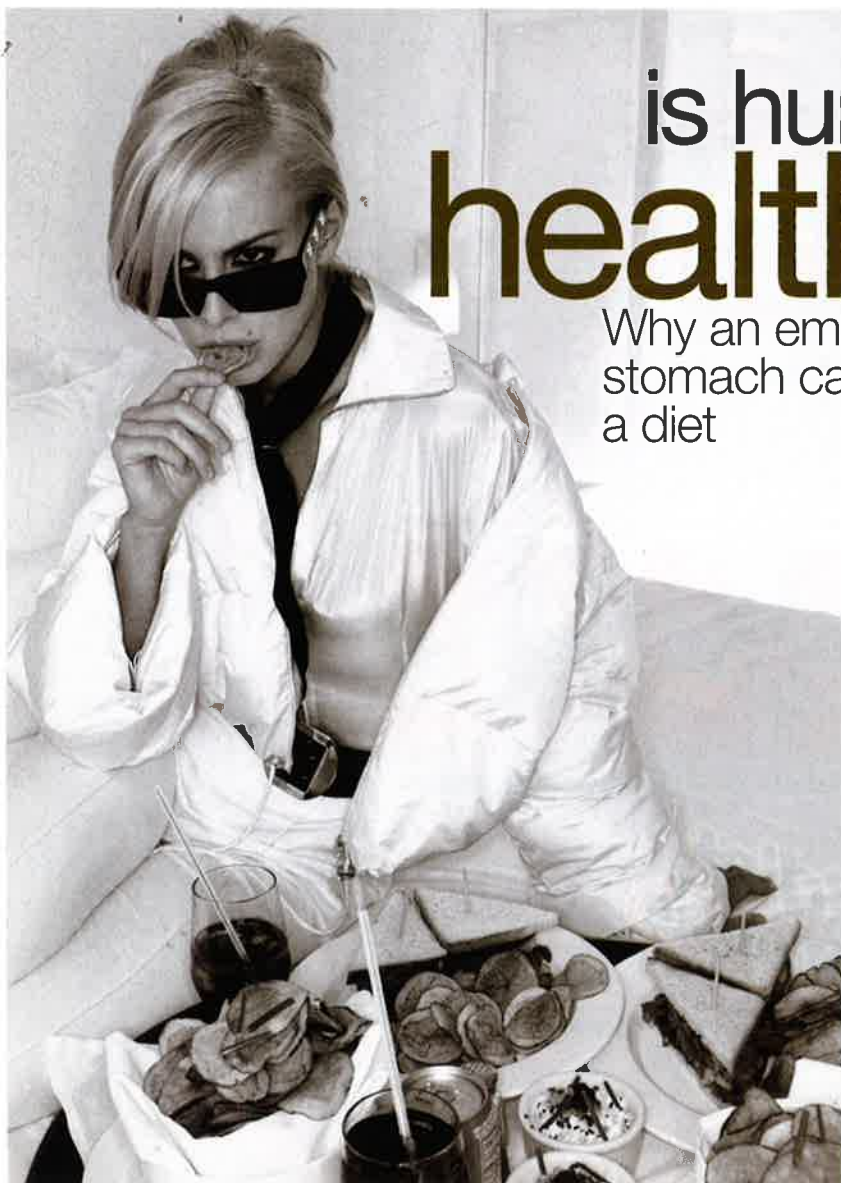
Bodies (Fawcett Columbine), attempts to retrain dieters to pay close attention to internal sensations, distinguish stomach hunger from mouth hunger, even carry around favorite foods so that panic—or deprivation—never hits.

But Garner advocates that dieters focus on *external* cues. "You reteach the body by developing eating habits that mimic or approximate normal eating—what I call 'eating with training wheels,'" he says. In other words, re-

establish balanced meals at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and never go more than a few hours without refueling.

The answer for many people trying to kick the hunger habit is probably to play both sides: Eat regular meals, yet also learn to recognize that stomach rumble as a sign to eat something more than a stick of gum.

But there's one more thing to think about before skipping another meal. "Turning hunger into something virtuous and self-validating places women in the oppressive position of having to do something antibiological in order to feel good about themselves," Garner says. "It's a good way to get a group of people to be less effective." Women who fend off fullness are way too busy to think about all those other hungers—for meaning, growth, fame, power, money, love. . . . Those can only be sensed by people who are well-nourished enough to pursue them. □



is hunger healthy?

Why an empty stomach can sabotage a diet

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