

What are we really hungry for?



Avnee Taneja is a psychologist passionate about mental health, criminology, and human behaviour. With a Master's in Criminology from the University of Manchester and ongoing studies in Psychology, she combines academic insight with real-world experience. From therapy and psychological assessments to research and advocacy, her work is driven by a deep commitment to understanding and supporting mental well-being.

AVNEE TANEJA

"Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are."

– Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

There's a quiet intimacy in the rituals of eating. A warm bowl after a long day, the familiar scent of something homemade, the calm that settles in after the first bite – these are moments that often go unnoticed, yet they speak volumes about our inner world.

As a psychologist, I've come to realise that food is rarely just food. It carries emotion, memory, and longing. It is comfort and control, reward and relief. In therapy rooms, people talk about their eating habits not just with concern, but with confusion – why do I eat when I'm not hungry? Why do I skip meals when I know I need the energy? Why does food feel like a friend one day and a foe the next? These are not questions of discipline; they are questions of emotion.

Food often becomes the first language of comfort we ever learn. From infancy, we are soothed with milk, rewarded with sweets, and fed when we cry. Over time, the brain begins to associate food with safety, with love, with a sense of being held. So when, as adults, we turn to food in moments of stress, sadness, or fatigue, it's not a character flaw – it's a coping strategy our nervous system remembers.

And yet, modern culture has complicated this relationship. We moralise food, label meals as 'good' or 'bad', link our worth to our weight, and celebrate restriction as discipline. It's no wonder that so many of us eat in ways that don't feel free. One client once told me, "I binge at night, not because I want to, but because it's the only time I feel like I can have something for myself." Another said, "I skip meals to punish myself when I feel like I've failed." These aren't stories about hunger – they're stories about unmet emotional needs, expressed in the language of food.

Hunger, it turns out, is not always physical. Sometimes, it is a craving for rest, for connection,

for relief from a restless mind. Sometimes, food is not a response to hunger. It's a response to feeling empty. The path to healing, I believe, begins with gentleness. Not rules. Not guilt. Just an invitation to listen more closely – to your body, to your mood, to your needs.

Approaches like mindful or intuitive eating help us move from judgement to awareness. They remind us that food is not meant to be earned, nor should it be feared. Instead, it can be approached with curiosity – What am I feeling right now? What am I truly hungry for? Am I eating to cope, to connect, or to care? When we ask these questions without criticism, we start to untangle the deeper threads. Of course, it is important to remember that not everyone has the same freedom to choose how they eat.

Economic challenges, cultural norms, and systemic pressures shape access and habits in very real ways. Any conversation around food and mental health must acknowledge these realities. But even within these constraints, we can find small ways to practice kindness toward ourselves. A quiet meal without distractions. A moment of gratitude before eating. The decision to let go of guilt and allow pleasure. These simple acts can become powerful anchors of self-care.

Food is not just fuel. It is history. It is emotion. It is identity. And it is thought. Each bite holds the potential to tell us something – not about what's wrong with us, but about what we need, what we miss, what we long to feel.

So, the next time you sit down to eat, pause. Listen. Not just to your stomach, but to your heart. Let the moment be soft and let the act of eating be less about control and more about connection. Because in a world that often asks us to shrink ourselves, to numb discomfort, to rush through every sensation, choosing to nourish yourself with awareness, compassion, and care is not a small act. It is a quiet, radical form of healing.

And perhaps, the most meaningful kind of nourishment we can offer ourselves is not the food on our plate – but the permission to be present, to be human, and to be whole.

