



## FOOD RULES VS. **FOOD GUIDELINES**

Glenn Livingston, Ph.D. and Howie Jacobson, Ph.D.

This is a transcript of a full length  
interview recording available here:

<http://www.neverbingeagain.com/TheBlog/?p=305&preview=true>

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You may reach Howie Jacobson at  
[www.PlantYourself.com](http://www.PlantYourself.com)

**Dr. Glenn:** So hey, this is Glenn Livingston with Never Binge Again and I'm here with Howie Jacobson again from plantyourself.com. How are you Howie?

**Howie:** Very, very well, happy to be talking to you.

**Dr. Glenn:** I'm happy to be talking to you too. And I was wondering if we could have a brief discussion today about food rules versus food guidelines. Would you be open to that?

**Howie:** Sounds good. What's the difference?

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GLENN LIVINGSTON Ph.D.



**Dr. Glenn:** Well, what's the difference between saying, "I avoid chocolate most of the time," versus, "I will never have chocolate other than a Saturday again for the rest of my life."

**Howie:** Okay. I guess the main difference is you can tell when you've violated a rule but you can't tell in any given instant when you have crossed over a guideline.

**Dr. Glenn:** Yeah, right. I think there are some people for whom guidelines work better. I think if you don't tend to be the kind of person who lies to yourself about food and you don't tend to start with an inch and then take a mile, if you're really that kind of person and you prefer not to have the observational rigor and restriction, I always feel like the goal in creating a food plan is to maximize your freedom while simultaneously protecting your health and fitness goals and so there's always a delicate tradeoff to play between that.

I think that when people who do tend to lie to themselves about food and people who do tend to take a mile when they give themselves an inch, in certain areas, I think that they do much better, dramatically better to use a rule as opposed to a guideline because if you say, "I avoid chocolates most of the time," well is today most of the time or not? And if I had it yesterday, does that mean I can have it today and it's still most of the time and because if I count all the days in the year then maybe I could have it for 10 days. It becomes possible to justify just about anything.

**Howie:** I didn't have any chocolate while I was sleeping last night.

**Dr. Glenn:** Right.



**Howie:** That's a third of my existence, chocolate-free right there.

**Dr. Glenn:** Exactly.

**Howie:** Right, those of us who can be lawyers and then commit a vigorous defense of our bad habits at any given moment.

**Dr. Glenn:** And I like to phrase the food rules with a "never" and an "again," because never really implies under no circumstances, and again implies between now and the day that I die. And most people think I'm a nut when I say that, and the reason they think I'm a nut is they feel like well, what if you do make a mistake and how are you going to live with yourself and doesn't that just open the door for you to do whatever you want to do if you do make that mistake. I tell them that none of the above is really true because what we're trying to do here is get really, really, really clear about what's on our plan and what's off our plan.

And you know, I talk about there being a kind of an alter ego, a fat thinking alter ego inside and that's the entity that lies to us, I call it the pig and I think that the pig will use any little hole in your food plan to drive its twisted logic right through. Did I ever tell you my story about chocolate being a vegetable?

**Howie:** No.

**Dr. Glenn:** So, this is a long time ago, I was on this diet and the essence of the diet was that I eat vegetables most of the time. That was the primary guideline that I would stick with was that if I was hungry I would eat vegetables most of the time. And I was checking out of Starbucks with



my morning coffee and there was this big, hairy chocolate bar in the counter that was just taunting me. And one of those things were like the longer you stand there, the better it looks. And eventually my pig says to me, "You know Glenn, chocolate comes from a cocoa bean and a cocoa bean grows on a tree, therefore chocolate is really a vegetable. And your new diet, you're supposed to have a lot of vegetables, right?" I say vegetables most of the time. And that's really kind of an extreme example and I knew that that was crazy but all I really needed was an excuse at the moment and so I went to town.

**Howie:** That's the basis of like most of people's Facebook feeds is the article that says, "Hey bacon will help you live forever, it's got niacin."

**Dr. Glenn:** Right.

**Howie:** Dark chocolate or wine -- one of my teachers, Dr. John McDougall says famously that people love good news about their bad habits.

**Dr. Glenn:** Yes and that makes really good headlines. That's really a totally extreme example of how it's possible to lie to yourself, but the more specific you can make the rule, the less possible it is to lie to yourself without knowing that you're lying to yourself. In the chocolate as a vegetable scenario, I kind of sort of knew I was lying to myself but if I had a rule that said I will never eat chocolate again or I will never eat chocolate except for Saturdays again, then it wouldn't have mattered whether chocolate was a vegetable or a fruit or a vitamin, I would have had a rule that said I'd never eat chocolate except for Saturdays and as long as it wasn't Saturday I couldn't have the chocolate.

**Howie:** Right. I haven't thought of them as rules but when I teach people label reading, instead of saying, "Try to watch your sodium," or, "You want to



reduce your fat," well say, "If you look at the food label, if more than 20% of the calories are from fat and it's not a condiment, put it back," or "The sodium shouldn't be more than the number of calories per serving," right? So these are numerical. It's like a clear litmus test, so you can get a true false answer.

**Dr. Glenn:** It's more than a true false answer. It's a definition which 10 neutral observers could agree on, right? Like if I had a rule that said I never have chocolate except for Saturdays and there were 10 people that followed me around all day and then at the end of the month we took a survey of them, they would all agree on whether I follow that rule or not. If I had a rule that said I avoid chocolate most of the time and then I ask those 10 people at the end of the month whether I avoided chocolate most of the time, there would be some discussion and argument.

**Howie:** Right. I'm thinking like flying to New Zealand during the night of changing the clocks back, like how far would I go on Saturday and convince myself that it was okay?

**Dr. Glenn:** I think if you're willing to fly to New Zealand to do it I'll give you a pass.

**Howie:** Yes, so this reminds me of two things from my world, one is the phrase that's the bane of the existence of people who teach the plant-based diet like it do is when people say, "Well, everything in moderation." And they're saying that like it's an obvious thing and we're a bunch of crazy extremists. When you look at what people mean by everything in moderation, they mean, "Well, it's breakfast time, I can have a little bit of bacon. A little bit of bacon is not going to kill me." "It's coffee break time, that donut isn't going to kill me," right? So that moderation turns into this never-ending binge because there's no way to define it.



**Dr. Glenn:** Exactly.

**Howie:** One more thing that I just thought of when you use the word "never again," I just read a published study of death row nutrition which was looking at public records of condemned prisoners about to be executed, what they ate on their last day. They get to choose.

**Dr. Glenn:** Interesting.

**Howie:** And it looks an awful lot like the standard American diet. It was more calories, it was slightly higher in fat but it was things like cheeseburgers, pizza, steak. It kind of shocked me into realizing that most of us are eating as if it's our last day, as if there's no future.

**Dr. Glenn:** Oh, that's interesting.

**Howie:** You say never again, that's kind of what it brings to mind. There's some point in the future at which if I did know I was going to die, the meteor was going to hit tomorrow, I might change my eating habits. But most of us are eating that way already.

**Dr. Glenn:** Day in and day out, yeah, that's funny.

**Howie:** Can I ask you a question about guidelines?

**Dr. Glenn:** Yeah.

**Howie:** So it seems to me that if guidelines work, they are preferable because they're sort of less restrictive, less stressful, you have to wrap your identity around them. Are there ways to make guidelines work without



going to rules or is it really just stop lying to yourself and make a freaking rule already.

**Dr. Glenn:** Oh, I haven't written this down anywhere but I exercise more days than not. There's no place that I really track that. There's no contest that I'm trying to win, there's nobody that's following me around to make sure that I do it, I just kind of have a guideline for myself that I exercise more days than not and it works really well for me. I would say that there probably hasn't been a week in years that that wasn't true unless I had a really bad flu or something like that. I think that it's impossible to have a rule for every human behavior that you engage in throughout the course of your day, week, month and life. The places that you want to install rules are the places where you find you're consistently getting in trouble.

It's kind of like putting a red light up in the center of town, you only put it in places where there's a dangerous intersection and otherwise you really want to allow the free flow of traffic. I think that people operate more from guidelines than from rules but my contribution I believe is to make sure that people know the difference between guidelines and rules and when you find there is a place in your life which is not working with a guideline, for example I was having four or five tons of chocolate every year, then it becomes necessary to use that rule.

**Howie:** The rule doesn't have to be a never rule, right? The only thing about that that's different from the rule and the guideline is the 10 neutral observers that agree on it. So if you decided that my rule is, while I'm having 4 tons of chocolate a year, I only want to have 2. Your rule could be, I'm only going to eat one bar of dark chocolate a day, and if that's in consonance with your health goals and your fitness goals or your weight goals, then it's still a rule.



**Dr. Glenn:** Yes, that's true but if you wanted to do that, the natural question if you don't have any type of a time limitation or a circumstance limitation beyond that, an actual implication is until when or with what exceptions. You say, "I only eat one chocolate bar per day." Well that's a rule but maybe I didn't really articulate, "Well you know, except for Christmas and my birthday and my sister's birthday and Groundhog Day." And so you're leaving room for your pig to come up with excuses. This is not a black and white choice. There's a continuum between squishy guidelines, softer rules and then really hard rules.

A harder rule would say, "I will never have more than one chocolate bar again between now and the day that I die." And that's kind of a statement of character that this is the way -- I mean this is how I behave. I also think that when we say that there is a part of us that separates out and says, "Well, I have the right to change my mind later if I really want to." And I think we always have to reserve the right to evaluate our food plans and learn from experience and I think your food plan is an evolving document that grows. But because in the moment of impulse we don't really have access to that level of cognition to do that analysis, I think that if there's an area that you really get in trouble, you're much better off with a very, very firm rule, I will never have more than one bar of chocolate again between now and the day that I die. I think you're much better off with a very firm rule so that the pig can't sneak something in impulsively.

And then if you should decide later on because you've changed your exercise routine or there's some new study that comes out that is really legitimate that says if you don't have chocolate you're going to get brain cancer or something like that, then sure you can change it at that time. But this way there's no room to lie to yourself. There's no room



whatsoever to lie to yourself when you do that and that's what I find is more successful with people who tend to lie to themselves about food.

**Howie:** Right. I guess what I'm getting at is that we think of rules as stricter than guidelines. But if your guideline is, "I don't eat that stuff," it's not fixed or, "I rarely eat that." "I don't have any rules, I just eat whatever I'm intuitive. I listen to my body." That person can end up being intuitive and eating a lot of crap because they may be listening to the pig. The guideline is so strict that they can't keep it but if they set a rule to say, "I'm only going to have 10% of my calories from this food that I know is not good for me," the rule is actually more lenient but easier to follow. Does that make sense?

**Dr. Glenn:** Say it again. I lost you there in the middle somehow.

**Howie:** People think that rules are stricter than guidelines. Now, you could have a rule that's not at all strict to say, "10% of my calories --" or for someone who wants to eat a plant-based diet, they may not want to give up meat. So they could say, "Three meals a week could have meat in them. Eggs, fish, beef, chicken, pork," as opposed to saying, "Well I'm pretty much a vegan," stricter but it's not.

**Dr. Glenn:** Right. A rule is very specific but it's not necessarily more depriving than a guideline.

**Howie:** Yes. Well, you said that good.

**Dr. Glenn:** Yeah, I talk very good sometimes when I do the best [inaudible 00:12:29].

**Howie:** Right. The rules are about specificity not about restriction.



**Dr. Glenn:** And for me, I've always felt like when you're willing to adopt a rule with that level of specificity and when you're willing to use the never again part of it, then you're really making a statement of character about the kind of person you plan to be. I think that's part of why it works so much better for people that have trouble. When you say that, what you're saying is I am more than my appetite. There are other things that are much more important to be in my life than being able to have more than one bar of chocolate a day. Because of that, I'm willing to take this vow that I will never have more than one bar of chocolate a day between now and the day that I die.

**Howie:** Got you.

**Dr. Glenn:** That's what I have to say about rules versus guidelines. I wouldn't want people to walk away thinking that they have to make a rule for everything. I hope that was clear. I think if there are people who have the health that they want and the body that they want and the energy that they want and feel like their diet is regulated really well using intuition or guidelines as opposed to rules, then I see no reason for them to take on the extra burden of having a rule.

But the purpose of the rule is to give you freedom. If you feel like you're a slave to your appetite, so if you feel like the appetite is overtaking your ability to accomplish what you want in life and causing you to think too much about the food and spend just entirely too much energy on when you're going to have it, how are you going to recover from it and maybe you've been beaten up so badly by the chocolate that you'd rather make the statement of character and move on in your life, then I want people to understand the technology, for lack of a



better word, the way to phrase a rule to prevent the pig from talking you out of it.

**Howie:** Very good. I love the traffic light analogy, right? Imagine if you had traffic lights every 10 feet on the road, it's unnecessary but there's places where it is, there's places where stop signs are good enough. There's places where caution, there's places there you need to build ramps. The ideal traffic flow for everyone's pleasure and convenience is just enough and no more.

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